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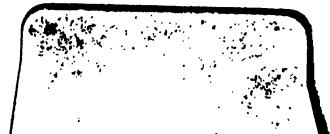
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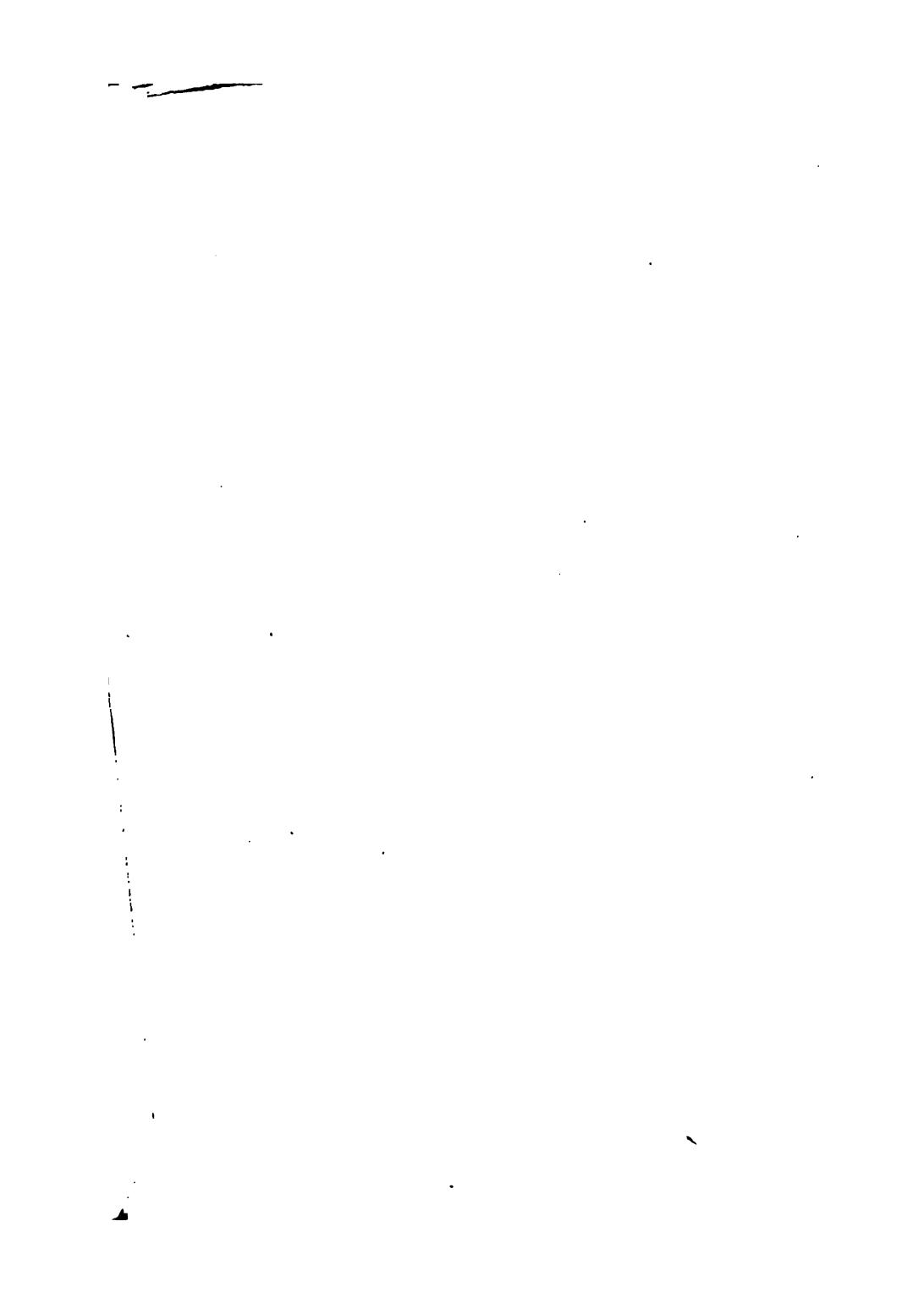


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SO RUNS THE WORLD AWAY.

VOL. III.



SO RUNS THE WORLD AWAY.

BY MRS. A. C. STEELE,
AUTHOR OF "GARDENHURST."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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SO RUNS THE WORLD AWAY.

CHAPTER I.

AZRAEL.

WHILE the two in the sunshine outside parleyed with love, George Moore was communing with death. When Azalea left her foster-father in the morning, he was lying on his sofa, more than usually well and cheerful, watching with interest the eccentric motions of the kitten, beating time with his fingers when the clock chimed, and mumbling various directions to old Sally, who rejoiced in Master Moore's asperity, taking it as a sign that he "must be feeling better, poor dear."

VOL. III.

B

The change came suddenly at last ; the great failure common to all increased on him very rapidly. When Azalea returned to his presence, she said, with a sudden pang of disquietude—

“ I don’t think he seems so well as usual, Sally : do you ? ”

And Sally, better accustomed to symptoms of disease, shook her head.

“ I have made bold to send the little boy who brought the milk to the doctor’s, to ask him if he can’t step this way presently ; according to my thinking, Miss Azalea, Master Moore won’t trouble us long.”

The old woman meant no unkindness ; she only spoke after the manner of her class. To the poor, who have to grapple with life as with an enemy, death does not wear so harsh an aspect as he does to earth’s more pampered children ; but her words sounded horrible to Azalea. With a face bleached of all its glow, and an expres-

sion of anguish about her quivering mouth, she flung herself down in a heap by the old man's side.

"Are you feeling ill, father?" she cried. "Speak to me!—just once!" And while with passionate devotion she besought for the comfort of a familiar tone which might ease her sick heart, George Moore looked vacantly at the clock, and answered not a word.

The old doctor who answered Sally's summons, like her, shook his head when he saw his patient's state; and as neither she nor Azalea were of sufficient importance in the social scale to make it necessary to spare their feelings, he told them frankly that the old man would not live many hours longer—perhaps not more than twelve: he gave them a few simple directions, the first of them being that the patient was to be disturbed as little as possible.

"For death rejects all palliatives, my

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dear; you can do nothing for a dying man but turn him on his side—they say the final pang is easier to bear in that position—and leave him to his God."

" You can do nothing!" Azalea repeated the words mechanically as she sat and stared at the dear face which was so soon to be—What? She scarcely knew. Something which would transfigure the familiar lineaments into awfulness.

The young find it hard to realize the hopelessness of death—hard to bear the anguish of incompetence with which they must fain watch life failing into clay. They are as children living in a house which they believe to be indestructible—that faith which a bird has in its nest and a dog has in its kennel a child has in the impregnability of the human shelter which has protected its youth.

All through the night George Moore lay motionless, turning upwards eyes which seemed to reflect a deeper awe than that of

the solemn shadows they gazed on. It was not until dawn that he spoke.

Then he muttered, "Azalea!"

She was at his side in an instant, and was in time to receive the only heritage he could bequeath her. Even as he looked a blessing on her pale face the priceless guerdon of endless peace was granted to his own. A child's countenance in slumber is fair and untroubled, but no calm is so profound, no repose so lovely as that which falls on man during the first moments of his forgetfulness of life.

Later in the day Captain Mowbray stood in the Auriel conservatory, wondering greatly why Azalea did not meet him as usual. He had come straight to this, their usual trysting-place, and had not heard of the tragedy which had been enacted in one of the chambers of the desolate house. Auriel was ordinarily so silent that even death could not intensify its calm. Thurstan paced the dull-red flags impa-

tiently ; but yesterday he had decided to relinquish the temptation of this girl's presence, and now it irked him that his temptation should not fall in his way so soon by ten minutes as he had expected. He had not decided on his plans for the future ; he thought he should have to part from her very soon ; he intended no evil ; he would not act unfairly to her ; but it would be brutal to leave her without an explanation and another kiss. Captain Mowbray suffered from the not uncommon delusion that kindness of manner palliates the motive which pains ; but who cares how the knife is fashioned that gives the stab which murders ? If he vacillated as to what course he should pursue in the future he was quite certain that he craved her presence now : and he walked to and fro impatiently, and twitched spitefully at the weltered leaves that trembled with decay on the twisted vine boughs overhead. This dilapidated conservatory was

a favourite resort of Azalea's; it had a certain weird beauty of its own in its very wildness and desolation; the wind blew freely through the broken panes, and the hiated spaces showed bright patches of sky in the day and made a framework for one or two trembling stars at night. A few mildewed clusters of late grapes drooped from between the brown-edged vine-leaves; here and there a truant berry dropped softly into the nook of a twisted branch where, obscured by the film of a spider's web, it withered away into juiceless nonentity.

There were no rich-scented exotics, no gorgeous hues of tropical blossoms to bring hints of foreign suns to the wintry noon; the walls were nearly bare; a few rose-trees which had been torn down by the wind or bent double by their own weight left ugly rotten patches of bast to indicate where careful hands had once secured them to the bricks; there was about the place neither

warmth nor colour, excepting, indeed, outside the house, where a Virginian creeper sent up ripples of flame against the dull walls. The ragged leaves, the fading fruit, the poverty-blighted aspect of the scene annoyed Captain Mowbray.

"So horribly untidy," he complained; "these greenhouses want at least three gardeners to keep them up." And Azalea, to whom Auriel had seemed more beautiful than ever since love had entered its gates, shook her head in dissent: her heart was in a paradise and her eyes saw with her heart. In the glamour of her new delight the most ill-favoured weeds in Auriel would have seemed as gracious flowers.

Captain Mowbray thought the conservatory very dismal and the wind very cold. I think he was more prone to feel the cold now than in the days when the sea-spray wetted his brown curls as he lay prostrate on that beach in Sussex sore at heart for love of Lady Di Merton; but

then as we love others less we are apt to love ourselves more.

When at last Thurstan heard a light step rustle the dead leaves which the rain had clammed together on the threshold his face brightened, and he moved forward quickly with his hands outstretched; and then he stopped, checked by the unwonted look in the girl's face, as she stood motionless in the doorway. With the red glow of sunset on her hueless cheeks and sombrous eyes, she recalled the solemn beauty of one of those deities carved by the old Egyptians—faces that accorded well with the deep repose of illimitable deserts.

“What is it? What has happened?” Thurstan said, anxiously; then dumbly, like an animal which by the distress in its eyes draws its master to the spot where its offspring lies hurt, the girl led her lover towards the chamber of death.

And when Captain Mowbray learned what had happened, and found himself con-

fronted by the unseeing scrutiny of the dead man's gaze—when he realized that in the whole wide world this desolate girl had no one but himself on whom to depend for protection and love—every latent good quality he possessed arose to champion her cause. He could think no wrong to that helpless creature, who, after one look of despair at the motionless form on the bed, came to his arms for comfort in her dire agony—for shelter from the nameless terror which was oppressing her. The young man felt his own face grow hot with tears as he strove to caress away the misery in hers.

“Hush, my darling! hush! don't cry so. I will take care of you. I will love you all my life. Kiss me, Azalea, and be comforted.”

Idle words, but none the less honestly meant at the time. That night when Captain Mowbray held his last interview with the dead, the gentleman made a com-

pact with the peasant now ennobled for ever by the hand of God.

George Moore dead shielded Azalea even more effectually than he could have done living. The dumb lips pleaded her cause with all the eloquence of powerlessness ; the strangely lustrous eyes reflected Captain Mowbray's conscience in their light, and entreated mercy for the friendless survivor who had been so dear to the corpse while it was man.

" I will marry her," Captain Mowbray said, in answer to the silent interrogation of the dead. " Please God, I'll take good care of her, and make her happy."

" Whatever will Miss Azalea do ?" old Sally said, as the young man placed Azalea in her charge ere he left Auriel that night ; " and what will become of me ? Master Moore was as good as five shillings a week to me."

" Take good care of her, and I'll see that you are well paid," Thurstan said hastily.

Then he kissed Azalea's cold cheek and whispered that he would be with her early in the morning.

Thurstan smoked cigarettes with more than usual rapidity in his homeward walk to-night—a symptom with him of mental perturbation.

"Yes!" he mused, "I must marry her, I suppose—there is nothing else to be done that I can see; but I must keep it quiet or there'll be a devil of a row with my father and with my creditors."

Then he thought of Lady Di, and sighed. The face of an old love is never so vivid in our memory as when its place is about to be usurped by a new one.

"But after all, this one is far younger, far prettier, and far fonder of me."

Thurstan dropped to sleep this night in a strange confusion of trouble and pleasure; he awoke once fancying he was kissing some one, but could not be quite sure whether it was Lady Di or Azalea. He

laughed and blushed at his own perplexity, and repeated softly, “Azalea is much fonder of me.”

The sense of being much loved was delicious to him; a woman rarely feels pleasure in the affection of any man, however comely he may be, whose passion she does not entirely reciprocate. It is perhaps due to the more material elements in man’s nature, that, ordinarily speaking, he differs from woman in this respect. The thought of this girl’s love and beauty pleased Captain Mowbray’s senses and reconciled him to the sacrifice he was about to make for generosity’s sake.

CHAPTER II.

FOR BETTER OR WORSE.

THERE were not many mourners for George Moore. Azalea whom he loved and protected cried herself blind in the first agony of her sense of loss, and the birds he had used to feed on his window-sill came through the open casement on the morning succeeding his death, and wondered that his hands were so chary of grain. One of his more intimate friends, a robin, actually perched on the cold wrist and sang a little song to the dead, and held its head on one side in a vain quest for the crumbs which had been wont to reward its lay. There was no one else to regret George Moore.

The poor and the solitary are as dim lights in the illumination of life's gala day, and when they are extinguished in night, their absence is not even perceived.

When George Moore was buried—when that solemn presence had passed away from the house, Captain Mowbray breathed more freely and moved with a gayer step. When he approached the Auriel portals it was a relief to him to think, when he looked up at the windows, that the little bed-chamber was no longer tenanted by that soulless effigy of life.

Captain Mowbray would fain have treated death as an ill-bred acquaintance : he would look another way if he met him ; he would cut him when possible ; he would ignore his presence on every occasion and feel more injured than shocked when he saw the clownish fellow seize a gentleman's hand whether the latter willed it or no, and lead him away into the shadows, among all sorts of queer company.

The village pastor—an eccentric and accomplished man, who occasionally addressed eloquent homilies to himself (at least he was, as a rule, the only member of his congregation capable of understanding any part of his sermon excepting the concluding blessing)—took an unfair advantage of Captain Mowbray in the funeral sermon, which was preached the Sunday succeeding old Moore's burial. Thurstan had settled himself for a comfortable nap ; he had assumed that air of profound attention which is the preface to somnolent oblivion ; he had lowered his eyes from Azalea's tear-stained face, and was concentrating his gaze on his boots when the concluding words of the preacher rang from the pulpit with the solemnity of a storm-bell whose breath is resonant of shipwreck. He besought his hearers not to walk backwards towards the dark road which is the halting-place of all the nations—not to be beguiled by a vain security into forgetting that grim gaoler

who will sooner or later fetter peasant and peer alike in gyves which no mortal hand may unlink—"because, look you, this is the inevitable failure common to all; this is the universal pang, the apprehension of which makes the great pulse of human kind beat in sympathetic accord. Ye Pharisees making parade of long prayers and of purple robes—ye who seem conceited of your own excellence, and who are prone to believe that publicans have less chance of salvation—have ye not your moments of irresolution and humility? fearing lest, when ye cease to judge others and are yourselves judged, flaws may be found in your moral armour which may level ye with the mendicant who was too squalid to be permitted to kneel in the temples of the rich?

" You, the poor wretch who grovel in sin, who look at life's enigma through eyes bespattered with mire and find its best solution in warring against your fellows—

you, the great statesman, whose mind is large with its traffic in worlds—you, the fond mother cuddling your first-born in that divine extasy which is born of brute affection—you, adulteress, whose life is a mean lie or a brazened shame—you, gambler, absorbed in the fierce excitement of an unwholesome and ungenerous greed—you, soldier, whose glory is a weed which flourishes best over rotting comrades—you, young bridegroom, with your face ablaze with heart-content—you, lonely vagabond, cowering for refuge in the broad darkness, like a bird that finds men's walls too cruelly smooth to build a nest on—you, king in the purple—you, gipsy in the heather,—you are but one in your destiny—all doomed to face the great truth which death reveals! Before that truth all lies will be useless, all equivocations hopeless. Do you never shrink from the thought of that terrible elucidation? Do you never, waking in the night, sweat under the nameless

terror which is breathed in the wail of the wind—the sob of the darkness, and cry in your heart-writhe, ‘ So surely as the morrow dawns ’will I purge my soul of its particular sin ;’ and as the glad daylight puts you in conceit with yourself once more, you breathe freely again, crying, ‘ Here is sun—here is life—the truth is yet far off—I will dream no more of the terrible pause in which the soul awaits the sentence which will endure to all eternity !’

“ Look you, friends ; be careful to amend ere the light stiffens in your eyes—ere the poor guilty heart is pulseless and the lips vacant ever of their living tenant, the voice—ere you are a carcass for worms to eat and earth to cover as an unsightly object—make your peace if ye may. Do not barter all for a small part, lest you in the last hour be seized with a pang keener than all life’s pleasures were sweet. Infinite hope has been born within us, as-

suredly infinite mercy will be its guerdon if we only seek it ere it is too late."

"If the living were mine I should give it to some one else," Captain Mowbray said, emphatically, at the conclusion of the sermon; "the fellow has no right to talk in that uncomfortable way. I couldn't have my sleep out."

That evening when Thurstan sought Azalea, he found her writing a letter, on which her tears fell fast. For the first time since this grief had come to her she was constrained to put it into verbal shape. She was telling Robert Douglas that her dear father was dead, and as she traced the letters which recalled to her, that never more at dawn of sun or close of eve would she give or receive greeting from that beloved face; that never more, whether in blaze of June or grey of winter would he note with her the full-orbed peonies blush midst the grasses of the lawn, or the rose-trees blacken under the grip of frost—that

never again could she entreat pardon for childish faults—never hear his voice, although the birds sang as heretofore—never see his face, although his favourite dog stared her wistfully in the face ;—now as she realised all this, the more keenly perhaps because the first dumb horror of her anguish was passing away, leaving her a prey to vivid memories and tender regrets, Azalea felt that to gain back one blessed hour of her foster-father's companionship, she would willingly endure the bitterest penance that fate could devise. As she sat in the dim shadows of the saloon—her wan cheeks and fair hair according well with the pale desolation of that faded chamber—Thurstan half started at her weird appearance. In the blurr of the half light she was as undefined as any other gloom.

“Don’t sit so still,” he said, hastily ; “you might as well be one of those creepy ghosts who are supposed to be partial to

late hours and dark corners. I should prefer a glimpse of sunshine myself if I'd come up from underground. What are you doing?"

"I am writing to Robert," she said, sadly, "to tell him—all about it; you—know—I ought to have written before, but I forgot."

Thurstan put his hand caressingly round her throat; the touch of warm flesh and blood put all spectral horrors out of his head.

"My darling," he whispered, "I want you to tell Douglas something else. I want you to say that you have promised to be my wife as soon as possible. Will you say this, Azalea?—or stop, I had better write it myself."

Keeping one arm still about her, he seized a pen with his disengaged hand; and under the mingled influence of generosity and passion, wrote as follows:—

"MY DEAR OLD MAN,—

"Azalea has told you of her father's death. I can't make up my mind to leave her; and as the peculiarity of her lonely position makes it unfitting that our intimacy should continue on any other terms, I propose to make her my wife at once. I hope this will meet with your approbation. If it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon keep my marriage dark for a while, as I shall want a little time to prepare my father and my creditors for this news. I fear they'll be dreadfully cut up. I hope you'll be back soon, so that we may make some plans as to what Azalea had best do when my leave is up. I am awfully fond of her, and I dare say everything will come square at last. I don't know that I should have made up my mind to settle down so soon, but I remembered your advice when I last saw you, and I also remembered that I owed you a debt of gratitude. If I have in any way

repaid it by doing the right thing to your friend, I am satisfied—the more so, as it is certainly very jolly to have such a pretty little girl so fond of one.

“Yours ever,

“T. M.”

Thurstan sealed this letter without showing it to Azalea. He meant to post it at once, but forgot to do so for more than a week; and by the time it arrived at its destination Robert Douglas had departed from London, and was on his road to Auriel again. He reached his cottage late one night, and let himself in unobserved. He went straight to his bed-chamber, and unpacked with jealous care an alabaster figure of Psyche, which the accumulated savings of weeks had enabled him to purchase. To purchase this he had been obliged to deny himself all but the barest necessaries of life. He felt himself quite repaid now as he looked at its pure

loveliness, and pictured to himself Azalea's delight when she received this addition to her few treasures.

As his heart beat fast with the great joy of his nearer proximity to her, he forgot how unutterably weary had been the lonely hours he had passed by the sick-bed of his dying friend. He put it away from him—the sick longing, the heavy despair which had seemed to weigh him to the dust in the arid desert of that time of absence. He could have sung with the birds, have laughed with the children he passed on the roadside. Had the stars of heaven been within his reach, he would have plucked them from their cloudy setting, and cast them away in mere wantonness of sport. So like a madman is the wisest of men when he is bewitched by the radiant insanity of love.

As yet he knew neither of Moore's death nor of Azalea's marriage. The former was dumb, deaf, and blind in

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yonder churchyard, and the girl, the final hope, the final joy, the one late blossom of Douglas' sterile heart, was sleeping with her head pillow'd on her young husband's breast, comforted for her sorrow, and believing that Fate could bring her no further woe now that the shield of his love would be evermore about her.

CHAPTER III.

LOVE, THOU ART BITTER. SWEET IS DEATH
TO ME.

IT was night, the night of Douglas's return home, and Auriel was still as a sepulchre. The last embers had dropped to ashes in the grate. Azalea's linnet had the appearance of having committed self-decapitation, so tightly was its head buried under its wing. Azalea herself was sleeping with that half smile on her lips which only the happy wear while unconscious. The house was steeped in blackest shadow; Auriel wore a lonely aspect in the day, when the sunbeams did their best to revive

faded red and tarnished gold into some likeness of their pristine glory, and swallows paid brief whirring visits to the tenantless chambers in search of cornices appropriate for nests ; but now that the birds and light had alike departed, Auriel seemed absorbed in the deep pensiveness of age and desolation—no light, no sound, no sign of life. A wandering ghost might have glided through chamber after chamber without being vexed by any signs of human existence, unless, indeed, it had paused at the door of the small turret room in which love and beauty held festival.

It was the dumbest, darkest hour of the night, when a red tongue of flame made a sudden flash of light through the black shadow of the wainscot at the foot of the old oak staircase. A smouldering beam which had long been threatening mischief behind the panels broke into glaring fury.

The first tongue was succeeded by a longer one, which shot forward, and

receded like a beautiful baleful snake ; then a volume of smoke began to curl over the pictured faces on the wall. Presently the shadows on the first landing-place were pierced by the growing length of the flame. A scared mouse crept out through a cranny in the wall, and stared with bright eye and alert whisker at this terrible surprise in the night. The panels began to crackle and start. The mellow-faced beauties and the grim soldiers were illuminated as they had never been all the dim years of their sojourn on canvas. The sombreous hush of night was broken by the roar of flames. Smoke belched out from all sides ; the air thickened and grew hot ; the brooding anger of the old beam had now reached its acme of rage, and had burnt itself out, but not until it had infected the surrounding objects with its uncontrollable wrath. While death, the death of suffocation, or of scorching agony was rushing towards them, the pair in

the bedchamber slept on all unconscious of their peril. Each dreamed of the other's face, and read there no foreboding of the ghastly doom which was overtaking them.

The girl was the first to awake—awoke with a horrible feeling of stifling, as if some one were gagging her. Then she stared round with dazed eyes, and realized that death was in the room with her, and with her lover.

"Thurstan," she moaned; "oh, Thurstan!"

Then her terror found fuller voice, and she grasped him by the arm, crying—

"Wake up, Thurstan! wake up!" She did not speak very loudly, but something in the desperate concentration of her tone stirred the sleeper.

"What's the row?"

He was wide awake now, sitting up like one fearing the sudden attack of a foe yet uncertain as to whence the strol came. A hot roll of smoke curling

under the door made him comprehend the nature of the danger. In an instant he was at the door, and, opening it cautiously, looked outside into a blackened gulf in place of a landing. Then he closed it, shaking his head, and went quietly to the window and threw it open.

The ivy-leaves which fringed the casement were steeped in dew and moonlight; the sweet cool breath of night poured its balm into his awe-stricken eyes. In the first pang of surprise the faces of both had seemed set as though in stone; but as he sought for escape and shelter, for the woman now doubly his in her dependence on him, a something which was almost pleasure broke through his expression of stupefaction.

Azalea dropped one white arm in the forest of leaves, then pulled it back, shaking her head.

“ You see,” she muttered under her breath, as if fearing lest the red furious enemy without should hear and punish her

speech, "it wouldn't hold anything heavier than a bird."

She held in her hand a crooked stem of ivy, graced by a trail of foliage. Thurstan looked at it critically. "It won't hold; but it may aid," he said briefly; "let us see."

He pulled off the blankets and counterpane, and by his voice and self-possessed manner steadied the girl's trembling hands while she assisted him to knot them together. He even kissed her when they both stood once more at the casement, making an experiment of which life or death would be the test; for he was her lover still, and even brute love has its beauty—witness the tender pathos of a dog's eyes when she deprecates injury to her young; or the fierce vigilance of a bird guarding its shy mate.

The girl, returning his kiss, looked up at his face, glowing with excitement and hallowed by peril, and thought how dear—how infinitely dear he was to her.

"It is still nearly thirty feet from the ground," Thurstan said, when the string of blankets had been let down as far as it would go; "what's to be done now?"

What was to be done? Fire had shut them in a prison; the four walls which had been shelter and protection were transfigured into murderous gaolers. Very shortly the ruins of their shackles would fall about them and destroy them, if they were not first suffocated by the white, pitiless coils of smoke. Their eyes began to smart; the girl's face grew more hopeless: there were yet, however, no signs of resignation in Thurstan's face. Manhood, in its prime of warm blood, fair looks, and eager desires, will not lightly resign the mysterious gift of vitality, which to him means happiness and enjoyment. He would fight for life inch by inch, he swore in his pride; but when he looked at the girl by his side, a softer impulse took possession of him, and with the reverence of doubt, he added —

"Please God."

He drew up the blankets again, and folding one round her, bade her sit quiet on the bed.

Then he made another effort at the door. He could see nothing now ; not even the shadow of the chasm formed by the falling in of the landing-place ; the smoke blinded and stifled him ; the opposite wall was invisible ; so were the mellow-hued paintings which had adorned its side. The grotesque carved griffins no longer frowned on the stair-head. He knelt down and groped with his hand towards the right. There had been a ledge along the wall, extending as far as the door of the saloon ; this ledge was usually occupied by a row of china jars. On summer eves Azalea sometimes brought in a handful of rose-leaves, glorified by sun and fresh with dew, to add to the faint-scented relics of old gardens. Thurstan's hand displaced the foremost of these jars, and it fell crashing from its place, the odd, ugly faces on its surface breaking in pieces

against the burning woodwork below. Left unmoved, the jar would have passed the ordeal of fire bravely, for it was a nobly-bred jar, had been fashioned by a Chinaman as a heritage for his grandson, hundreds of years ago ; but at a rough touch it shivered into fragments.

Thurstan felt the ledge eagerly. It was about five inches thick, and at present seemed secure : he thought it would do.

He went back to the room, blackened, half-blind and sick, but hopeful.

“ If we could get to the saloon,” he explained, “ we might escape through the other door. Come ! ”

She followed him quickly, taking hope from his tone, but at the door he paused in doubt.

“ Shall she go over first or not ? ”

She caught the meaning of the half-uttered thought and shuddered.

“ No,” she said, huskily ; “ no, no ! I will not ! ” A terrible fear came over her that

she might get separated from him in this peril ; that he might contrive her escape at his own risk. She feared life on such terms more than others who grovel in the terror of death.

She was conscious that this awful moment might be shadowed by a yet greater despair. “ Together, love ! together ! ” she muttered. “ Let us be together, whatever come.”

“ It doesn’t matter,” he said, sadly ; “ this chance is gone !—look ! ” He struck with his foot at the shelf, and it gave way like paper. The flames had caught hold of the shelf at the opposite end, and were leaping towards them with ferocious gaiety. A fresh cloud of smoke made them recoil behind the shelter of the door ; then Thurstan closed it gently, as one who lets fall a coffin-lid over a dead face, and bore the girl back to her couch.

Through the open casement came hints of the quiet night ; a distant church-bell told the hours to its motionless congregation

under the turf. Meadows pale gold in the moonlight; long glooms under the elms; sweet cool airs; the fitful shadow of a bat crossing the moon's face;—such was the scene without. Almost all the innocent lives that haunt the air were stilled in that deep repose. No restless wing fluttered the leaves; only the sleepy croak of a raven answered the preaching of the church bell.

Captain Mowbray was still too reliant in the vigour of his health and strength to relinquish hope. Die!—of course they should not die! True, their best chance was gone; but death was not meant for such as they. Was that creature, clinging in his arms in all the plenitude of beauty and love, to be withered into a cinder? Was he himself to pass away from life in such horrible fashion? He tried the door again; but the outside gulf was wider—the danger more imminent than ever. He pulled the rusty wire of the bell violently, in hopes of attracting the attention of the old crone

below ; he went to the window and shouted until he was hoarse ; he speculated on every possible and impossible mode of escape. He tried to dash in the panels of the wall which divided their room from the saloon ; but the tough oak resisted his efforts. He tore up the old carpet into strips, and tried to lengthen the ladder of blankets which he had projected. It was not until every effort had ended in frustration, that Captain Mowbray began to wonder whether it was of any use repenting of his sins.

He went and sat down by the girl's side, and for a while they spoke no word.

Then he broke the silence.

“ It's very horrible,” he said, shivering.
“ Is this death, Azalea ?”

“ Yes,” she said, mechanically, “ this is death.”

“ It's very hard,” he cried, savagely.
“ I am none too good—but, oh, my little darling, what have you done to deserve such an end ?”

“ It might be harder to bear,” she said in the hushed, awed voice in which she had spoken ever since she had become conscious of their peril.

“ I don’t see how,” he answered gloomily ; “ to be burnt away to nothing like two helpless idiotic moths, ugh !”

“ We are together,” she said, simply, and then they clung to each other and were again silent.

Then a reckless mood took possession of Mowbray.

“ What’s the use of my playing the saint now at the last moment when I’ve lived as a sinner all my life ?” he cried. “ What’s the use of my begging pardon now, like a schoolboy repenting in sight of the rod ? I have led what men call a ‘ fast,’ and God calls a bad life. I have rarely thought of sacred things, except to take their names in vain. My whole life has been for myself. I have given nothing to my God—what should my God give me ?”

"Mercy," whispered the girl, clinging tighter to him, "mercy and forgiveness. His forgiveness is not to be measured by man's, it extends to millions and is infinite : even at the last moment all that he asks is faith and repentance. Oh, my darling, my darling ! let us at least pray that we may not be parted for all eternity."

"It's no use, my dear ; a man is judged by his life, not by his death. Should I grovel from fear when I did not kneel for love ? After all 'tis but to go to sleep."

He averted his face from her and broke into a low song. Something about meeting death boldly, and fearing neither man nor devil.

His gay tone sounded more ghastly to Azalea's ears than the saddest wail would have done.

"Don't," she said, piteously.

Then she clasped her hand on his shoulder, and prayed.

"Our Father which art in Heaven——."

"Hark!" interrupted Thurstan, "do you hear that?" It was the sound of a beam falling outside.

"Hallowed be thy name," she continued, never relaxing the intentness of her eyes and tone. "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." Then her voice somewhat failed her. A feeling of suffocation choked her accents; but she looked at Thurstan so earnestly that he was fain to finish the prayer for her. It came to his lips mechanically—he had not uttered it since he was a little boy at his nurse's knee; but the sound of it brought a strange sense of comfort to him. She echoed his "Amen," feebly—her head dropped on his shoulder.

"Kiss me, Thurstan; it may be the last, the very last."

He joined his lips to hers and took her in his arms; they said no more, that kiss was their farewell. And with calmness born of despair, the two clung together as

though each would shield the other from the impending horror.

It was at this moment that Douglas walked to the window of his bedroom to look with a glance, which was a strange mixture of passion and reverence, a blessing on Azalea's home. Was that mist rising over the Auriel woods? Surely no mist was ever so concentrated over one particular group of firs. Presently the mist rolled away and was succeeded by a red light which wavered like a vast torch flared by the wind. The pointed tips of the flames made a fitful and novel architectural effect over the massive north tower. The pale stars gleamed peacefully over the crimson scene beneath them. No clamour of voices, no stir of birds or beasts, sympathised with the destruction of the old house of the Mowbrays. All slept—all were at peace; the wearied labourers were consuming their small modicum of sleep heavily as the famished devour food. There were no kine

in the immediate vicinity of the house, to be terrified by the ominous smell of smoke ; in the solitude of night and silence, Auriel was being consumed to ashes. It was isolated in its ruin, as though it were situated in the limitless space of a desert.

But the eyes of love are quick as those of terror. Robert Douglas could not retire to sleep without first looking out on those misty woods which shadowed in their depths the one charm of his lonely existence.

He would sit and look at them sometimes until trees and walls all melted away before the intensity of his imagining eyes : then he saw her—the gracious fancy of his life—he saw her sunny head bent in prayer, the little hands crossed in homage on her virgin breast—saw the moon shedding its benign light on her pure beauty ; and mingled with reverence for her innocence came the thrill of a deeper feeling—he would not define it even to himself—he

loved her so tenderly. She was so shielded even in his thoughts by her own guilelessness that he held the storm of his passion under control, rather than insult her image by its tumult; but there were times when a fancied touch of her hand—a vision of a chance caress from her hair as she bent her head near his, made his heart stand still in an extasy of pained delight. Then he knew that for such delight he would sacrifice all other earthly joy; that to lay his lips against hers would be a madness so sweet that for one moment of it he would be content to live over again the dreary solitude of his past miserable years.

On this night he was sitting at his window motionless, his arms folded, his sombreous eyes fixed on the starlit world above: he looked like one of those vast forms of Michael Angelo's which embody the spirit of prophecy. It was not until he was about to retire to rest that he lowered his glance, and then he perceived the danger

that threatened her. For one brief instant the love in his eyes changed to stupor—then a spasm of unutterable anguish convulsed his face.

“ My love, my love ! oh my God ! Azalea.” To fling off his coat, so that he might run disengaged, to arouse the inmates of a neighbouring cottage and despatch them to the village for assistance, was the work of a second.

With a mighty effort he forced his voice into an intelligible order.

“ Tell them to bring up ladders directly—to send man and horse to W—— for the engine ; tell them it is life or death—Auriel is on fire !” The astounded cottager gaped and queried, but the face pale as ashes had flashed past the casement. This apparition in the night had pointed its hand towards the red stain in the sky, like a scared spirit indicating the awful light of hell, and then had disappeared in the mist of distance.

Through dewy meadows which seemed heavy with stifling wind—through thick grass, which cumbered the striving feet—over shining roads—through cruel bars made by hedgerows, Robert Douglas ran; his eyes maddened by that terrible light. The mist seemed to cling to him like a winding-sheet; his heart was a burthen of stone, yet he did not relax his desperate speed; something within him sustained labouring breath and failing limbs. After the first half-mile he could not have spoken a word; a child's hand might have laid him prostrate; yet a giant could scarcely have turned him from his path. Nothing but death could have stayed his feet: he saw as in a dream the gloomy shadows of fast-flitting woods, the spectral shapes of the alders which lined the river side.

A silver haze shrouded the dark waters; and this, too, passed into the phantasm of the night which appeared to flee behind him. The river was a dim silver line,

twisting through folds of meadow land. The roads were patches of yellow light. The clouds above were playing wild freaks with the moon. Everything seemed to hurry. The whole landscapewas in motion ; only he was retarded, heavy and helpless, for want of wings.

Presently he sank to his knees in thick, wet reeds, and then he knew that he had mistaken the path, and that the planks which bridged the river were nearly a quarter of a mile higher up. He did not hesitate, but dived into the waters, dropping his haggard visage face to face with the moon's reflection, and making with his arms a sore disturbance amidst the flat weeds on the surface.

The shock of the immersion refreshed him ; he struck out with new energy. Had any stranger seen that wild face moving across the stream with nostrils dilated, eyes staring, and hair matted with slime and weeds, he would have fancied it

to be some animal fleeing from a pursuing death, rather than the fleshy effigy of a noble soul ; but no human eye was present to mark his desperate efforts. Around him was nought but pale fields, white in river mist and moonlight. A low wind stirred the sharp reeds, and blended with the whirring in his ears ; the air was loud with one continuous whisper. Dark shapes splashed away from the brink as he neared the other side : things which shrieked and flapped their wings, and then scuttled away down the stream, leaving trails of silver in their wake.

They were but startled wild fowl ; but to Douglas's half-blinded eyes they seemed vast shadows in the hideous phantasmagoria through which he struggled ; but, although wan meadows, swarthy waters, the clouds of heaven, and the mists of earth were becoming merged in one blurred, confused haze, the gurgle of a distant mill-stream increased to thunder, and the church

bell tolling one o'clock bellowed death above the tumult. But one colour, one sound was distinct above all :—the red light over Auriel was eating into his eyes until they were scorched with pain ; the voice, the possible cry of Azalea, conscious of her deadly peril, maddened by her defencelessness, pierced the dull distress in his ears, until he could have screamed aloud in sympathetic anguish. Thank God the obstacles of fields and hedgerows were cleared now. He was free of them all. He was under the broad lime avenue ; his limbs had fuller play. True, his breath felt compressed as though it were held in by heavy coils of rope ; his bloodshot eyes burned like coals, but the pain in his heart was eased ; he was nearer the goal. In another minute he should be with her—in life or in death.

Tufts of grass and loose stones became mighty difficulties to his bruised feet. Not that he felt pain. For the time being

the height of his mental trouble deadened his physical sensibilities, but he experienced an awful sensation of relaxation. For one moment he felt as though he were failing—as though he had striven so far only to fall in a helpless, inert heap in sight of, almost within touch of, his soul's desire. One last effort—one more shadowy group of trees left behind him, and then he leapt, rather than ran, round the last curve of the path, and Auriel was before him. There was no sign of life about the place, save where a few half-stupefied birds flew out of the ivy—no symptom of any effort to escape on the part of its inhabitants; either they slept in unconsciousness, or death had deepened sleep.

Douglas tried to call, but his lips refused to make any sound. He tried the doors, but they were securely fastened. He beat his head and arms against the panels, but they were oak, made strong with nails, which bruised his flesh, but against which

he could make no impression. Then, with the yell of a wild beast made mad by the torture of the prison bars' gall, he fled towards an outhouse, where he remembered to have seen a ladder lying against the ivied wall. It was the ladder on which Thurstan Mowbray had given that love-kiss to Azalea when the sun cast red light on the little head embowered in golden green leaves and filmy spider's threads; when she had tossed down the ripe fruit from the loft above, and received as her guerdon the Judas touch of passion.

Around this ladder Douglas twined his arms, and with an effort, for his strength was well-nigh spent, and the ladder was heavy, dragged it under the window of Azalea's bedchamber. For one brief second he drooped his livid face against the bars, crying in his heart, "Help me, O God, lest I fail!" Then he lifted up his brow on which the swollen veins stood out like heavy wales, thrust out his arms, and

ran up the steps crying in a hoarse voice,
“Azalea, child, I am coming to you!”
In another moment he stood in the open
casement, and reeled forward towards the
bed, then recoiled and stood dumb and
motionless.

On the couch before him were two persons, a girl and a man. Their arms were about each other. The girl’s head rested on the man’s shoulder ; her limbs were nearly bare. Face to face with death, who would take heed to deck the clay he will presently claim as his own ? When she had lain down in Thurstan’s arms to die, she had believed herself to be alone with her husband and her God. Shame engendered of the sham decencies of civilization does not exist either for the newly-born or the dying. Her lips were half open, as though she were still communing with Heaven ; her eyes, lifted up in a sort of stupor, neither saw nor heeded Douglas. He, on his part, gazed for an instant on the dazzling white

arms coiled round the younger man's throat, then he plucked at them furiously, and sought to take her in his arms. The rough touch aroused her.

She moaned "Thurstan," and tightened the embrace of her arms.

Douglas drew back as though he had been struck on the face.

"Shall she die?" he muttered; "shall I leave her where she is?"

Then he looked at the little feet hanging like two snowflakes over Mowbray's knees, and pictured them, as they might be presently, scorched by the cruel flames.

"I will save her," he panted; "she shall not be touched. She shall live; but as to him"—

He looked at Mowbray with a glance of inexpressible aversion.

"This smoke will soon kill him," he thought; "he will be dead—dead—dead!"

He repeated the word with vindictive satisfaction. That powerful frame, that face

bright with colour, the curling hair, the strong arms which enfolded her—all would soon be as nought—a thing which man might kick without its feeling the injury, which reptiles might crawl over without its flinching, which Azalea might kiss without its lips stirring to her caress.

Meanwhile the roar of flames grew louder, and a portion of the wall near the door fell in.

Then a sudden impulse—an impulse born of something greater than human passion, thrilled the miserable wretch who was the only conscious spectator of this strange scene.

“Awake!” he thundered in Thurstan’s ear. “Fool! are you going to die like a rat in a hole?”

He seized a jug of water and dashed it against the young man’s face. He dragged him to the window, and left him there, the night air blowing in on his bare chest.

Then he gathered that prostrate form on

the bed to his arms. (He could not touch her until he put that other man at a distance from her.)

Meanwhile the alarm of fire had aroused the sleeping country.

From homestead to homestead, from peaceful hamlets to towns where Vice keeps vigil, the cry of alarm had passed on with the rapidity of a malign rumour. The quiet lanes round Auriel echoed to the gallop of horses; the flower-beds were trampled down by an excited crowd. A roar of voices began to mingle with the roar of flames. Cries of warning and encouragement arose in all directions. Presently the crowd which had surged by to the walls, like a disorderly attacking army, paused to observe a strange spectacle.

They saw a man descending the ladder placed against the north tower with a burthen over his shoulder. A fair, helpless, half-dead looking thing, whose hair fell around him in a shower of pale gold.

It had white limbs which drooped heavily by its side, and which afforded no sort of assistance to the perilous descent.

“ It’s a woman ! ” cried those below.
“ Hurrah ! he’s saved her.”

“ No, she’s dead.”

“ Not she—only faint.”

“ Steady the ladder ; don’t you see it’s nearly over ? ”

Amidst cheers and acclamations, with a sea of pale, wondering faces turned up towards him, watching his progress with intense excitement, the man on the ladder came down rapidly and gave the form he carried into their arms ; then before question could be asked or explanation be given, he rapidly reascended the steps and disappeared into the cloud of smoke issuing from the casement.

When he was next visible, he was blackened, scorched, blistered ; his hair and eyebrows were singed and his face was undistinguishable. He called out—

“ There is a man here—some one of you come and take him; I cannot bring him further.”

Instantly a dozen hands steadied the ladder; two men ran up the steps and assisted each other in bringing down the helpless figure of Thurstan Mowbray.

They laid him on the grass and made a space round him. The girl, who had partially recovered her senses, crawled to his side and bent over him; her first conscious thought was of him, as had been her last.

She trembled violently when she realized what had been his danger. It was not until he was sufficiently recovered to stagger up from his recumbent position that, following his movements with eyes still jealous with fear, she happened to glance at that casement through which they had evaded death. Then a great shriek burst from her white lips.

“ Look, Thurstan,” she cried, “ Douglas is there. O God! what is he doing?”

Douglas had waited until Mowbray was safely conveyed to the ground—waited until the last man was off the ladder—had watched the movement made by the girl below as she dragged herself towards her lover.

Was it by accident that he gave the ladder a push which hurled it to the ground ? Had he anticipated that from its age it was unsound, and would snap in its fall ? It did so ; and as the people below hurriedly endeavoured to remedy the fracture and shouted to him to keep a good heart, Robert Douglas turned his face away from the stars, the fresh air, and the friendly voices of his kind, and disappeared into the interior of the chamber.

CHAPTER IV.

QUICKSANDS.

IT was about two weeks after the fire at Auriel that, in the words of the court newsman, Lady Diana Merton, Lord Orme, the Honourable Mr. Orme, and the Honourable Amelia and Rosa Orme joined the distinguished circle enjoying Mr. Airdale's hospitality at Holme Park, in the county of Essex.

Lady Diana had arranged with Lord Orme that she should accompany his party to Holme Park, because she averred it was so dull travelling alone; the truth being

that, extravagant to profligacy in the smaller luxuries, obtained on credit, she yet had a magpie-like regard for small coins, and hated being obliged to disburse them. Travelling in Lord Orme's society implied that a large portion of the expenses of the journey would fall to him. She appropriated the most comfortable seats in express trains and hackney carriages with an air of unconsciousness which nearly goaded Amelia Orme into rebellion.

"I know she's only coming because Captain Mowbray is to be there," that young lady said to her sister, wrathfully. "I hate such mean underhand ways; and see how she twists papa and Conrad round with her little finger."

And indeed, Conrad, who had moulted short jackets, and was showing first symptoms of long-tailed coats, more than once announced to his bosom friend, young Spenser, Mr. Airdale's son, a fellow Etonian, by whose especial request Conrad

had been invited to Holme, that Lady Di was “quite his style, by Jove.”

Mowbray was not present to welcome his friends when they first arrived.

Mowbray was out hunting, the host said, in answer to a casual inquiry from Lord Orme; doubtless they would meet him at dinner time, as well as Clairveaux, and some other fellows, who had also gone out. But ere Lady Diana had been a few hours at Holme, she was better informed as to the real cause of Thurstan’s absence.

What scouts are to a general, is a quick-witted lady’s-maid to her mistress. Lady Diana rarely revealed her own plans of operations to her subordinate; but she made use of her to ascertain those of the enemy. Every one at Holme was talking of the disaster at Auriel. Captain Mowbray’s gallantry was the theme of every tongue. Had he not, when taking a moonlight stroll, and while discussing his nightly cigar, been attracted by the sight of the burning house,

and entered it at the risk of his own life to save that of the poor girl who was its only tenant? Something was said about that odd man, the schoolmaster, having given Captain Mowbray material assistance; but then the said schoolmaster lost his wits at last, and let the means of escape slip out of his fingers; and then, had not Captain Mowbray, having pieced a broken ladder with cord, ascended the walls of the house, and again imperilled his life to save that of the poor fool who had been too stupefied to think of self-preservation. But for the opportune arrival of the fire-engines, both must have perished; for it seemed that Captain Mowbray could not persuade his companion to make any exertion to save himself, and both men were half suffocated, and one much injured, when the firemen extricated them from the burning pile at considerable risk to themselves. The whole of the house was not destroyed; the south wing was only partially injured, and the schoolmaster

—it was he who had been hurt—was lying there now, attended by the girl who kept the house. The old woman who ordinarily lived with the girl had gone home to her cottage to see a sick grandchild on the night of the fire; and had it not been for Captain Mowbray's timely interposition, the poor solitary inmate of his ancestral home might have become ashes like the family portraits on the staircase, without any one being the wiser.

All these details were collected by Lady Diana's maid, Letty, and by her repeated to her mistress, while the latter underwent the soothing process of having her hair brushed.

“ Which shows the blessing of gentlemen's smoking after dinner,” was the moral the abigail deduced from this history.

Lady Diana mused deeply on what she heard, then she lifted up the grey eyes, and asked,—

“ Is the girl pretty whom Captain Mowbray saved ? ”

“Well, James” (James was Mr. Air-dale’s valet) “do say she’s a niceish sort of looking girl,” Letty admitted reluctantly, “but I don’t consider he is no judge. Captain Mowbray rode over there to-day, to inquire after her.”

“That will do; you may go,” Lady Diana said quietly. Then she clasped a necklace of brilliants round her white throat, and went down-stairs to the drawing-room so pre-occupied, that she never observed that she had pinched her fair skin in the fastening of the necklace, and that a tiny spot of blood was staining the brilliancy both of throat and jewel.

Lady Di ensconced herself in one of the old-fashioned sofas which adorned the Holme drawing-room; she was a good judge of effect, and knew how alluring she seemed when the dazzling whiteness of her bust and arms were brought into relief by the dark crimson settee that supported her; when her half-averted head showed the

exquisite contour of her throat, and her hair made a mellow glow against the cold shadows of the evening.

She was looking more than usually beautiful to-night she knew, and she did so wish that all her admirers *in esse* and *in posse* could witness her loveliness. Few things irked Lady Di more than to find her sweetness wasted in a desert drawing-room, wherein there were no men. She felt on such occasions as a Soyer might feel who had provided an exquisite repast of which no guests came to partake. Lady Di's attitude would have done equally well for Thurstan or Lord Orme or Clairveaux. As it happened, Captain Mowbray was the first to enter the room.

Thurstan flushed at the sight of her.

"By Jove," he thought, "she is handsomer than ever."

Lady Di on her part greeted him with genuine satisfaction; all the languor in her eyes, all the indolence of her movements,

gave way before the brightness of her pleasure. As she sat there resplendent in her gracious loveliness, bringing to bear on him all the attractions of her wit, beauty, tact, and experience, Thurstan became fairly dazzled.

“I have never forgotten you,” he said, in answer to one of her half-playful reproofs; and Lady Di smiled a little scornfully to herself, for she knew well that her former lover had entirely forgotten her for a space, and it was only the power of her presence now which made him fancy that her attraction had been ever equally strong.

Suddenly Lady Di asked:—

“What became of that man—the schoolmaster, whose life you saved?”

A deep gloom fell on Thurstan’s face, as he answered—

“He left Auriel for his own cottage, despite our earnest entreaties, this morning; he was quite unfit to move, but he

persisted in going. Do you know, Lady Diana, that man is one of the noblest fellows on God's earth? he saved my life twice. And yet it is very strange, but when I sought to repay him, by dragging him out of the smoke that night, he struck at me fiercely, and said something which sounded like a curse. I think he must have slightly lost his head."

"Very likely," Lady Di said, indifferently. Then, looking keenly at her companion, she added—"And what about that girl?"

Thurstan drew his hand away quickly (it had been resting on the back of her chair, in near proximity with her shoulder), put both hands in his pockets, and walked to the window; his sudden recoil from herself was an answer to Lady Di's suspicions; she had judged so many criminals at the bar of her beauty that she was quick to detect the slightest evidences of guilt—she perfectly understood that she had recalled another love to Thurstan, and that sudden remorse

at his forgetfulness of the duty he owed that love, prompted the withdrawal of his hand.

“There is nothing to see out of the window,” Lady Di said, drily; “it is pitch dark. Do you not think you would be better occupied in fastening my necklace? it is unclasped.” She lifted up her chin, still dimpled, and white as that of a child, as she spoke, and he was fain to obey her request.

“You have hurt yourself,” he said, suddenly, as his eye fell on the ruddy spot of blood; and as he spoke his voice involuntarily took that intonation of tenderness which not uncommonly graces a strong man’s lips when he speaks of any injury, however slight, done to the beauty of a woman. Lady Di, with half-closed eyes and upturned face, had assumed somewhat of the attitude of a cat sidling up its head to be stroked, and Thurstan Mowbray looked as if he were not far off granting

the responding caress, when the door opened, and Amelia Orme entered the room.

“Let me do that for you,” she said to Lady Diana, in a tone of quiet malice; “men are so stupid about such things; see how clumsy Captain Mowbray’s fingers are, and what a long while they take to accomplish their task.”

“So you found them when he entangled your hair in the clematis,” Lady Di said, giving back the blow with a smile.

“Men’s fingers are stupider, but so much pleasanter, don’t you think?” she added, placidly. “Please go on, Captain Mowbray.”

Captain Mowbray hurriedly clasped the necklace, and Amelia retired scowling. She had all the will but not the ability to cope with the graceful effrontery of the elder woman.

The rest of the guests now entered the room. Any novice in the art of coquetry might have taken a useful lesson from Lady

Di on such occasions as these. Numbers did not dismay her. With exquisite tact she contrived to make each comer believe himself favoured beyond all others; she looked tenderly at one, she murmured to another some apparently trifling words, which in fact had reference to a bygone mutual flirtation. She contrived in the most masterly manner to make all discussions, whether on literature, politics, or fashion, incorporate some personal reference to herself. Did they speak of a new mode of wearing the hair? She managed to remind Clairveaux of a certain day when he had accidentally touched the soft beauty of her own tresses. Did they mention the last new novel? She referred to some passage in it which treated of the desirability of second marriages, and entreated Lord Orme to read it; and when the budget was discussed, and Mr. Airdale grew eloquent on the subject of naval estimates, Lady Di imperceptibly led the conversation towards

our coast defences. Then she spoke in a low voice to Thurstan of the Sussex coast; hinted of a certain hour when she had stood there in the blaze of noon, with her heart cold with despair; hinted of the tears she had shed when she returned to her solitary home, feeling that life had become a weary blank, that all its brightness had passed away after that moment of sun-glow, when his lips pressed her own in the last bitter-sweet caress. She did not allude to the concern she showed at her overdone sweet-bread, or to the useless expedition she made to Italy in pursuit of Lord Orme. Lady Di never talked about her failures.

That night, when the party was breaking up, Lord Orme came up to Thurstan, and said with some emotion—

“Did you really save that poor girl’s life at Auriel?”

“On the contrary,” Captain Mowbray explained, “it was a great friend of mine, a fellow called Douglas, who saved us both.”

"But you were the first to enter the building with the view of rescuing her," his host said, eagerly. "It was a noble act, Mowbray; you needn't look so ashamed of it." Lord Orme took the young man's hand and shook it warmly.

"God bless you!" he muttered, and turned away, somewhat confused at his own enthusiasm.

Captain Mowbray stared after him blankly.

"What the deuce was I to say," he thought, ruefully; "it's very awkward being thanked when you don't deserve it; but how could I explain matters without letting the cat out of the bag? Poor little girl, she must be dull now Douglas is gone. I will go there early to-morrow."

"What shall I give you for your meditations?"

Lady Di stood before him with outstretched hand, and the faintest suspicion of a yawn revealing her pearly teeth.

"What shall I ask?" he said, drawing nearer to her.

She looked at him with an indescribable expression: a delicious combination of shyness and passion—of doubt and confidence. Suddenly the expression found voice.

"You know well that anything you chose to do for me would meet with any requital you could name. You know that I cannot forget; that I have never ceased to reproach myself for my folly in letting my happiness slip out of my hands. Can you forgive me, Thurstan?"

They were standing on the landing-place outside the drawing-room door, she herself partly concealed by the heavy curtains of a window near which she leaned; her beautiful shoulders were shadowed by the exotics that were placed on the windowsill; the light of a lamp overhead shed a subdued glow over the fairness of her round arms half extended in supplication. Thurstan looked at her with a vague idea that

some evil fascination was dragging him down to hell. He wondered if the air there was thick with the perfume of flowers. If the light was dim, and revealed beautiful women instead of ugly fiends. If the music in those lurid glooms resembled rich low tones, full of subtle temptation, such as had just now trembled in his ears.

Then he grasped her wrists, and cried,—

“ You try me too far, Lady Di. You tempt only to disappoint; you inspire hopes only to baffle them. Now I will be honest with you, not that you deserve honesty of me, but because I will not fight you with your own mean weapons. When you first taught me to love you, I paid back your lie with truth; I loved you as sincerely as ever man loved woman; I would have made you a good husband, although I was as you *said* too young, as you *meant* too poor, to marry a woman of your age and prudence. You threw me over because I wouldn’t be content with the husks of a heart, because,

being a chivalrous young fool, I insisted on an honest, substantial proof of the devotion which you had pretended to feel for me. Well, there's no need to talk any more about the past. Only tell me what you want of me now. If you wish to lure me back to a state of semi-madness about you, you are yet beautiful and charming enough to succeed ; but I warn you fairly, I cannot woo you on the same terms, for I am no longer free ; and if you tempt me to woo you, I swear that I will win you. Do you think that a man is to be tortured, wounded, and goaded like the poor brutes that writhe under the skill of the Matador ? and do you think the Matador always escapes without injury ? I think it kindest to tell you without equivocation, that if you persist in giving me encouragement, I shall, whether you like it or no, take any advantage of you circumstances may put in my way."

All the colour had faded from his face. There was a threat in his eyes which she

had never seen there before. Lady Di became conscious that she had raised in this man the latent tiger which now and then shows its teeth between human lips, through all the smiles of civilization. The brute had often showed its face to her before; she rather liked dealing with this savage phase of a man's nature. She showed a certain audacious courage in fighting these iniquitous duels which would have been worthy of admiration applied to a nobler end. Had she been a man, she would have been a great blackguard; or a great hero—perhaps both. History has taught us that the combination is not impossible.

She did not cower before the storm she had evoked; but when she looked up at this man's face and saw how handsome it looked in its menace, she thought that she had never liked anyone so well as she did him. She liked him better in his wrath than ever she had done when he wooed her

with smile and entreaty. And he said he was not free! Then her suspicions were correct about that girl; and at the thought of her rival, Lady Di felt as though a knife were thrust into her—heart, I should say, if speaking of any other woman; but in this case I ought, perhaps, to substitute the word “vanity” for “heart.”

“Forgive me,” she said, beseechingly.

“Bah!” he replied, impatiently; “that’s what you always say. Women are the most unreasonable devils in the world; they seem to think that civil speeches will compensate for anything. I daresay that the daughter of Herodias thought that an apology would comfort John for the prospect of her taking his head as a guerdon for that grim revelry of hers. I do forgive you, Lady Di; but I must punish you; and you may be sure that if you offend again, you will not escape so easily.”

Without further words, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

Another woman might have reddened under that caress, which was almost as menacing as passionate, but this one paled visibly. Lady Di could no longer blush, although she could fear. She did not fear Thurstan, but she was apprehensive of any one of her admirers appearing suddenly on the scene. She could explain away most things, but even she could scarcely have given a satisfactory reason to Lord Orme or to Clairveaux for her being kissed on the stairs by Thurstan Mowbray. The latter caught her quick glance directed towards the drawing-room door, and laughed grimly.

“I prefer to bully you here,” he said, “because you cannot, for your own sake, make a noise. However, I won’t be ungenerous, Lady Di. You may go.”

He released her, and she looked at him wonderingly. “How changed you are,” she muttered.

And in truth Captain Mowbray was far

more eloquent in the face of opposition than he ever was when lapped in content. The suspicion of intended injury, combined with the recollection of his past suffering, made him speak in a very different strain from what he usually indulged in. The woman who had said him nay had seen a phase of his character utterly unknown to the single-hearted girl, who had but one word, the ever ready yea of love, for him.

Fortunately, or as Lady Di said piously, providentially, none of her other admirers made their appearance on the scene, and the two parted without their interview being detected.

Thurstan thought a good deal of Azalea to-night, not that he felt conscious of having done her any especial injury in that little matter of the kiss he had given Lady Diana. A man may feel some conscientious scruples when he first goes into debt; but after a certain amount of time and experience, insolvency seems a natural and not

dishonourable condition. A man when he first goes on the turf may mean to keep on the square, but he must be a very exceptional character if, after a while, he does not trick his best friend, and think himself a very clever fellow in so doing ; and a man who has come to look on women in the light in which they were regarded by Thurstan Mowbray would scarcely feel much compunction in adding one more to the number he had already distinguished by his osculatory attentions. Do not think that I defend or admire him ; I think that he represents a low type of man. I know that he has nothing but a few ordinary virtues, such as courage and good-nature, to recommend him. Compared to his moral stature, Douglas was as a Titan. But did not Helen prefer that stupid fair-faced boy Paris to the gallant brother of Agamemnon ? Was not Menelaus, vulgarly speaking, worth two of that stripling shepherd ? All lovers can't be heroes, nor does it seem

that the greatest heroes have been most tenderly loved by women. Did not Marie Louise, after having been one with the greatest hero (in a mundane sense) that ever plucked off other men's crowns to place them on his own head, condescend to her chamberlain? Was Cæsar as loveable as Antony? Let the spirit-rappers interrogate the shade of Cleopatra, and hear what the serpent of old Nile has to say about it. Nevertheless, if old scandals are to be credited, the modern poet has no foundation for calling the head of the Octavii family dull or cold-blooded. Perhaps these epithets in Cleopatra's mouth are merely intended as natural expressions of feminine malice uttered in revenge for the imperial contempt.

One of the most distinct signs of Captain Mowbray's moral obtuseness was his utter innocence of the wrong he was doing Azalea in thus renewing his intimacy with Lady Diana. He would not willingly have

vexed that dear little girl who was sitting alone in the Auriel shadows, dreaming of him and him only. Had she known, and seemed much cut up, at any of his proceedings with regard to other women, he, very likely, would have altered his ways for her sake; but, as it was, the reflection that what the eye doesn't see the heart does'nt grieve, was an unfailing salve to such trifling wounds as his conscience sustained. He was still very fond of Azalea, and you may be sure he will not kiss her any the less warmly to-morrow because he has been faithless to her lips to-day.

* * * * *

When Robert Douglas recovered his hurts sufficiently to crawl away to his own home, he wrote a few words of farewell to Azalea, in which he entreated her not to break in on his solitude for some little while to come.

He avoided seeing her before he went, alleging that he was not strong enough to

sustain even the slightest excitement. Since that terrible night, when mental anguish surpassed the animal fear of death; when all life's miseries seemed culminated in the burthen of that fathomless despair, Douglas had never spoken to or looked at her, whose very presence was in itself a wound to him; the sound of her voice made him wince. He had come to regard her with somewhat of the shrinking aversion a caged lion feels to the hand which has subjugated it with a burning rod. He turned his face from the light and from her; he would admit of no attendance save what old Sally could render him. He felt that a glance at Azalea's face, insolent in all the radiance of happy love, would madden him beyond endurance; all he asked for was solitude and silence, and these obtained he sat and watched his pain from dawn to eve, his eyes dull with pathos as those of one who cannot turn his gaze from the horror of a corpse. When the sun was brightest,

his lids were closed ; when the air was loud with the ecstasy of birds, he was mute.

A stranded wreck makes no response to the soothing ripple, the whispering kiss of summer-warm waves ; the dismantled hull, victim to the brief mad passion of a stormy hour, is merely a sullen blot on the golden sands. Personifying disaster, it seems to brood over its tragedy of the past ; the desperate effort—the wail of despair—the unhelped supplication, these are its memories, and so it lies between the glows of sky and sand—a darkness in the sunshine—a silence in the murmuring tides.

Ever mutable waves play round its despondent sides. The silver fringes of the surf sport over it ere rushing back to the deep bosom of the parent sea.

Grey dawns look coldly on its sombrous shadow; red eyes flush it with tawny glory; winds sigh or storm over it; shells cling to it; fresh-scented sea-flowers throw themselves into its lap. Ships come and go;

greeting and farewell echo over it; but it retains that calm which succeeds destruction, that apathy which marks decay. It is a pause in the midst of life's eloquence. It is a paralytic mocked by the sound of dance and song; through all the mutable vitality of nature it is dumb, deaf, and immovable. It worse than perishes—it stagnates.

Douglas's farewell to Azalea ran as follows:—

“MY DEAR CHILD,

“I am quite well enough to move now, and I fancy that I shall get well soonest in my own little home, so I leave you; and do not think me unkind if I say that, for a time, I shall prefer utter solitude to any society however agreeable. I am much shaken by the terrible events of the last few weeks; and I would fain forget, if possible, some of the horror attached to this place. I do not apologize for leaving you; for a note I received from Captain Mowbray a

few days after the fire, informed me of the relation which subsists between you;—a woman blessed with a young husband who loves her, and whom she loves, does not need to be troubled by the sight of a weary old face like mine. I shall so far interest myself in your future as to try and induce your husband to communicate his marriage at once to his family; and in other respects I shall try and fill the place of your dead father. But I need not dwell on these things to you: may God bless you more than he has seen fit to pardon me. If ever you are in trouble—if ever you need comfort or assistance, write but one word '*Come*,' and you may command the presence of

“Yours faithfully,
ROBERT DOUGLAS.”

Azalea wondered and grieved a little over Douglas's absence. Sometimes when Thurstan was not there to banish the

thought, the dreary winds of evening seemed to whisper to her of something which she had lost—something of shelter, of protection, and of love, which had passed away into her foster-father's grave, and into that homely cottage in the Auriel Lane. But her lover's voice, her lover's touch, were sufficient to woo her back into the beautiful dream, which she, in her ignorance, mistook for reality; and in that dream the melancholy of her future desolation was not prophesied. How could she guess, inexperienced in all hearts but her own, which was as true as her life had been sinless, that Thurstan was already a little weary of the prize he had won without a struggle; that his sometimes restless manner and thoughtful eyes harboured treachery to herself; that he did not understand her, and that the enigma which had possessed its charms at first, became fatiguing in its unintelligibility? Lady Diana was never hard to understand. She

had the art of making her own intellect subservient to that of her lover's. She conveyed ideas to him in such fashion that he was deluded into believing that he himself had engendered them. No one can deny that it is far pleasanter to have a mistress who makes you feel her superior than one whose genius is distinct and unsociable as a monolith. Thurstan understood that Aza-lea was very pretty, and that she worshipped him, in consideration of which he overlooked her peculiarities of mind; but then Lady Di was also very lovely, and . . . at this dangerous point of his meditations, Thurstan would generally walk away from Holme in the direction of Auriel, much on the same principle as made the soldier in the fairy tale take a bite of antidotal apple, when he found the influence of the magic pear becoming too serious.

Reader—supposing you to be a man—have you ever suffered the inconvenience of loving two women at the same time?

If so, you can sympathize with the perplexity of the ass, when trying to make a choice of thistles ; or the vacillating of Alexander between his rival queens. The situation is not uncommon, although it may be undignified, and is not altogether undeserving of sympathy.

Meanwhile, when Lady Diana watched Thurstan break away from the toils she was beginning to wind round him with all the gentle tact of an experienced spider making advances to its pet fly, and leave her for the tenant of that blackened ruin at Auriel, she bit her pink lips until they bled, and swore that, come what might—whatever trouble it entailed on herself—whatever disaster it might inflict on others—she would win back this man to bondage so complete that he should sicken at every hour spent out of her presence, and weary of the cause which thus detained him.

You see, one of those misfortunes which

overtake the most hardened coquettes had fallen on Lady Diana.

She was really in love—not for the first, or even the second time, you may be sure, but she felt it none the less keenly for that. After all, she was at this moment more deserving of pity than her younger rival. Love to Azalea was Paradise—to Lady Di, Purgatory. Azalea believed in all things, more especially in her lover—Lady Di believed in few things, least of all in human faith. The rat which has undermined many a stout ship can scarcely have much confidence in the stability of timber. Lady Di would have given much to be able to have a good hearty belief in any man. She would fain forget the inevitable decline from the heights of a grand passion to the dregs of a spent one. She knew too well how in the most constant breasts the sweet tumult of passion—passion which is like the beautiful storm of the tropics, where strange phantasms and colours of unspeakable glory are

incorporated with the wild splendour of the tempest—dies to calm, and from calm to stagnation. Even in victory she tasted defeat; while in defeat she suffered as severely as though its pangs were unforeseen.

Thurstan's dereliction wounded her vanity—more, it wounded her heart—she loved him. The sight of his face was sweet to her; his voice gave a charm to the day; his eyes haunted her like a pleasant dream; she knew that he would be nothing more than a dream in her life altogether, for she was in truth too old to marry him had he been free (and he had insinuated to her that he was bound by more than ordinary ties to another), and she was too poor to retain him long as a lover, for her pecuniary circumstances were becoming desperate, and every time a fresh dun knocked at the door, she looked at Lord Orme and thought, “Marry me, you must—whether you like it or not.” So Thurstan would be nothing

but a pleasant myth ; but when a mirage was lovely to her, she judiciously avoided looking at it too closely : experience is a lens through which we see with painful clearness all the defects of the present.

Lady Di wisely shut her eyes and opened her mouth to take the bonbon which Fate sent in her way.

She studied her diary a good deal at this period. When she was fretted and irritated by the crooked course of her love affairs she became more than usually severe on the successful manœuvres of her sisters in coquetry, and she employed the hours of Thurstan's absence in adding to her store of moral reflections. She showed some of these to Thurstan afterwards, who was flattered by her confidence, and immensely amused by the sarcasms she levelled against her own sex. I need not say that she did not communicate to him those which referred to the superior animal.

More of Lady Di's Reflections.—Part II.

Why was love called blind and not mute? Sentiment ordinarily paralyses men's tongues, and has an equally deleterious effect on the grammar of their epistolary productions. Why does young Haut de Vere, a nice lad (whose father paid £400 per annum to a public school for the ostensible purpose of having his son educated), allow his feelings so to confuse him that he writes to me of his "excessive unhappyness"? No doubt he suffers as much as if he spelt it with an i, but it doesn't seem so; so much does the ridiculous mar the effect of the sublime. On the whole, his silence is an advantage. I prefer my Cymons before they arrive at the eloquent stage; their taciturnity is especially desirable at dinner-time, as I hate to talk at that time; then is *my* period for sentiment.

I have said that I will indulge in a few reflections concerning my own sex. The subject is an exhaustive one, and men have

had so much time on their hands lately that they have filled column after column with discourses on our good and evil qualities, so I feel mine to be a task of supererogation ; but then, who has written truth about us ? No one but Shakspeare, and he knew the ins and outs of everything. We are sublime and mean, candid and hypocritical ; we are virtuous and immoral to a height and to a depth of which man is incapable ; we are clever and puerile ; we are conscientious and unscrupulous : men are ordinarily one or the other of these ; but *we* are all of them.

We all know how to coquette, of course ; but we don't all know how to do it equally well. Very young girls essay it before they know how to do it gracefully, and stray into a terrible medium between gawkiness and forwardness. Older women should learn to resign the effort ere time has stolen away every weapon of offence.

Ah me !

I have been much amused by the varieties of coquetry which I have detected in my own sex. I do not allude to unmarried women; these have a definite aim, and all that they do is in the way of honest business. It is those who sport for the sport's sake, who delight me with their manœuvres.

There is the pious married flirt, slightly repentant, and very devout, who insists on her lovers going to church twice on Sundays. There is the matronly flirt, who keeps a careful eye on her brood, even while she plays truant from the coop—who chiefly confines her attentions to the clergyman of the parish, or the family doctor, men whose services to soul and body authorise a certain amount of coquettish gratitude. There is the miserable sinner who lives for her duty, while her heart yearns towards one who is outside her duty; who worships the blot which she feels disfigures her soul, and, while she strives to efface it with the uncertain effort of a feeble will, feels it cor-

roding her heart's roots. This specimen generally causes more misery than any of her sisters. She not uncommonly ends by disgracing her husband publicly after years of private injury ; by throwing the shadow of her burthen on her innocent children, and by being a life-long bore to the man whom she selects to afflict with her eternal society and uneasy conscience. There is the light-hearted, candid-seeming flirt, the most dangerous of any. Like all treacherous things, she seems all guilelessness. She is a quicksand, an amiable cat, who draws her claw down your arm, purring all the while. She is excessively attentive to her husband, during the process of en chaining a lover. She is a bird which never seems so attached to the nest as while it is migrating. She interrupts the most tender *tête-à-tête* with an admirer, if the husband but glances at the duet. She appeals to him affectionately, and draws him into the conversation. No one but a woman can ap-

preciate the delicacy of this open-hearted darling's scheme of operations.

"She tells him everything," she says; that is to say, she tells him everything he is likely to find out, and, by her naïve confessions, removes all suspicion of serious impropriety.

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Here the manuscript abruptly ended; probably Lady Di had been recalled from her meditations by interests of a more practical nature, or else she had grown tired of the subject. She soon wearied of all women, save herself.

CHAPTER V.

THE WOMAN TEMPTED ME.

“I SOMETIMES wish that I were somebody else, that I might have the pleasure of finding myself out,” said Lady Di, *sotto voce*, a few mornings after that brief interview with Thurstan on the stairs. She was looking pensively at Amelia Orme, and thinking how very obtuse and slow-witted that young lady was, not to detect in Captain Mowbray’s pre-occupied manner and in the stealthy glances he cast towards the object of his thoughts, the real state of affairs. Amelia, happily unconscious of the events

of that eventful evening, was airing her prettiest allurements to attract Captain Mowbray's attention. She drank her tea with a stratagem, she sighed over her dry toast, played with her butter, and repressed a naturally good appetite in a manner that moved Lady Di's pity.

"My dear child," thought the latter, as she composedly made an excellent meal, "it is of no use giving up one's little comforts on the off chance of attracting a lover. I don't believe that a man likes you the better for your abstinence, and if you fail in your designs on his heart, it's a painful aggravation to your sufferings to feel a physical as well as mental internal blank."

Lady Di did not allow her appreciation of her breakfast to interfere with her keen observation of Thurstan's movements. She noticed that he looked moody and troubled, and that the trouble was not entirely of a nature personal to herself. With a little pang of jealousy which all but neutralized

her enjoyment of a delicious morsel of pâté, she recognised the probability of his thinking of that other woman.

When breakfast was over she scandalised Miss Orme by the deliberate manner in which she strolled out on the terrace with the evident intention of joining Captain Mowbray, who was talking over his perplexities with his cigar.

“Shall I go over to Auriel this morning, or shall I stay here, with—with her?” Such was the burthen of his thoughts.

He had half promised he would be with Azalea early to-day, but then he knew he should feel sorry for himself when he found himself walking away from Holme; he had oftentimes in his boyhood vacillated in similar fashion between the right as represented by the heroic self-denial which should repress his covetousness of his neighbours’ orchards, and the wrong as typified by his consumption of the forbidden fruit; in such cases he had sometimes refrained (especially if the

orchard proprietor chanced to be a personal friend), but never without feeling after-pangs of keen remorse at the thought of all he had failed to enjoy.

He knew now that if he sought Azalea's society he should still be yearning after that of Lady Di; "he could see Azalea any time," and herein lay some of the secret of Azalea's failure.

With petty natures, security in possession is an antidote to passion; the more he thought he ought to go to Auriel, the stronger grew his inclination to remain at Holme; nevertheless, so much do men resemble cats, he no sooner caught sight of Lady Di, than he prepared to walk away in an opposite direction; but he moved at a slow pace, and that wily tactician saw through and smiled inly at his feint of retreat.

"Thurstan!"

He turned and bowed gravely, and seemed about to pass on.

"Men's affectations are very clumsy,"

Lady Di thought; “he wishes to go through the form of staying at my persuasion. Well, we can afford to save their dignity in trifles, when in essentials we grind their pride to powder beneath our heels. I have never yet known a man whom Love could not make a blackguard of.”

Unconscious of the self-condemnation implied in this cynical reflection, she proceeded gently with her work of demoralization.

“Look here,” Thurstan said, abruptly, after she had urged various pleas to induce him to stay at Holme to-day, “I will stay, but on one condition.”

“You are very peremptory.”

“No master so brutal as the rebel who was once a slave,” he said, with a short laugh. “Come in here; it is raining.” He pointed to a summer-house close by, and his companion obeyed his gesture, partly because heavy rain drops were beginning to splash her hair and shoulders, partly because she was awed into subjec-

tion by his imperiousness. If men and horses were but conscious of their own power, and knew how to use it, it would be a bad time for women and equestrians.

The summer-houses at Holme were not the ordinary combinations of mouldy walls, sticky seats, green slime, and earwigs ;—as a rule English arbours seem built for the express accommodation of centipedal hermits—spiders sulk in the corners, wood-lice lurk under the stones in a perpetual state of squash, and toads ruminante in the shadows. But this garden-house had more of the house than the garden in it. The floor and walls were dry, the seats were not made of contorted wood-work, such as those which seem invented to torture the sedentary ; there was a comfortable cushioned lounge near the fireplace, and in the grate a low clear fire was burning ; a vase of hot-house flowers stood on a centre table. Without all was winter and desolation ; within was the soft warm breath of sum-

mer; a bird flying into that cozy nook from the yellow, bleak, rainy world outside might have thought that June had returned in the flash of a wing.

Captain Mowbray was silent for a space, and stood at the window, staring moodily at the squalid landscape, and pulling his moustache.

"I think," said Lady Di, placidly, as she settled herself in the sofa near the fire, "that there is a storm coming up."

Then she unloosened her hair, and shook it down over her shoulders, with the ostensible purpose of drying it.

He made no answer to her observation, but turned and looked at her long and steadfastly. A modest woman would have reddened under such a look, but coquetry is more brazen than vice. One great sin may wound the heart with remorse, but the perpetual recurrence of small peccadilloes tend to make that organ callous.

Lady Di could not blush, but she held

her peace. There are some moods which are jarred by speech, and she felt instinctively that she could say no word which would not irritate the sullen strife brooding in his mind.

Silence is sometimes full of a mighty eloquence. Passion deepens in its still breath; hate smoulders, and love grows mad in that lull of verbal expression. There are pauses of which the very muteness portends calamity; that ominous dumbness may conceal a frenzy of inarticulate desires. Presently Thurstan walked up to his companion, and, taking both her hands, looked into her eyes. Lady Di drooped her own uneasily. She never could bear to meet an honest gaze; no one since the days of her childhood had ever encountered any but slant glances from those deep grey orbs.

"Di," Thurstan began, and his voice was husky with agitation, "do you see those woods yonder?" She nodded acquiescence. "There lives a girl who loves me dearly,

and to whom I'm bound by every tie of honour and affection. She is young" (Lady Di winced) "and beautiful; but"—

"But what?"

"But I'm mad about you again, and so mad that I'd give up everything if I could only think you really loved me! Di, my darling, I have passed the age of visions. I can no longer woo a shadow. Are you still to be a cheat, or a reality, a glorious veritable joy? Do not madden me by these pretty trickeries of yours if they mean nothing. Will you come away with me, Di? Will you come away to the Continent? I can't be away more than a few weeks, though," he added, with a sudden relapse into the prosaic, "unless, indeed, I sell out."

Lady Di meditated an instant—she could not quite decide what to do—a few moments since and she had caught herself feeling weary of her renewed triumph. But still she liked him—she liked his dark, handsome

face ; she liked it the better for the strong emotion which was now convulsing it—emotion which she had raised, and she only had the power of allaying. She looked at his yearning face, at his pleading hands held out towards her, and she hesitated—hesitated so long that he turned abruptly away, saying—"I will go, then ;" and without looking at her he walked towards the door.

In another instant she stood before him barring his exit, with extended arms half veiled by her soft tresses, her eyes shining like stars dimmed by grey vapours, her whole face radiant with an expression which he had never before seen there. It was the expression of veracity—for a brief moment the true triumphed over the false, and, in its broader light, her beauty seemed transcendent. Lady Di had never looked so lovely as now, when, the genuineness of her womanhood asserting itself, she dropped her hands into those of her lover, and whispered "Do not go, Thurstan, for I love you."

Then she disengaged herself hurriedly from his grasp, thrust aside his reluctant arms, and resumed her ordinary demeanour, twisting up the while, with expert fingers, the loose tresses of her hair.

Her sudden movement was explained by the approach of footsteps. Presently Lord Orme, with face innocent and serene, stood at the doorway, placid as a moonbeam playing on a conflagration.

“Will you point me out the way to Auriel?” he asked. “I should like to see how far your father’s house has suffered; also, I should like to ascertain if anything can be done for the poor girl you saved. She must be very desolate there.”

Captain Mowbray flushed a little, and hastily indicated the direction Lord Orme was to take. He deliberated for an instant as to whether he would not accompany him.

His good angel, as represented by a modicum of conscience, said “go,” and for a moment he half yielded to the mandate.

Then his bad angel, sitting on the couch by the fire, looked askance at him from under her deep lids, and said, with voice and gesture, "stay."

So he stayed, and Lord Orme went alone to meet the child who all her life had been orphaned, and was now widowed by her husband's faithlessness.

"Poor little dear," Captain Mowbray thought, as he sat at the feet of the lady in the summer-house.

"It's lucky she does not know!"

For myself, I am of opinion that ignorance is the basis of nearly all the bliss which we poor mortals enjoy.

Meanwhile, Lady Di smiled at her lover, and then stifled a yawn.

"To what are you listening?" he asked, anxiously, after one of those pauses which were now no longer tragedies, but delicious interludes.

"I thought I heard the luncheon bell," she said. "Shall we go in?"

CHAPTER VI.

UNSTABLE AS WATER.

THE dull, grey day was passing heavily enough with Azalea among the grim ruins of Auriel. During the early morning hours her heart was blithe with the hope of seeing Thurstan. She hummed little wordless songs as she attended to her birds, and made such arrangements in the sitting-room as she thought would tend to Captain Mowbray's comfort; his easy chair and footstool were placed ready for him. One or two books which he had imported to Auriel—an army list—the last published volume of the stud

book, and the current number of *Baily's Magazine*—were placed in order on his writing table.

The true woman is maternal even in her love affairs ; she delights in exercising little cares for her lover's benefit. Nothing pleases her better than to spend her time in removing the rose-leaves that may ruffle her lord's repose. I do not think that her lord adequately returns her civilities ; he would fight for her, no doubt, if it were necessary, but he would scarcely resign his easy chair to her, or omit to clatter the fire-irons because she had a headache.

Azalea, having completed her arrangements, sat and looked drearily out of window, watching the avenue until her eyes grew pained by the intensity of her gaze, and her heart felt cold and sick with disappointment.

“Lor', miss, don't take on so,” old Sally said philosophically. “What does a man matter when you've got a bit of meat for dinner, and a warm fire to sit by? Oh,

there's nothing like the pinch of an empty stomach for driving the men folks out of your head."

"But, you see, I never have been so hungry as all that," Azalea objected.

"Then until you have been, don't go and fancy you've got all the world's sorrow on your shoulders. I've seen some so hungry that they were glad to die to get away from the gnaw of it. You young things who fret so over your sweethearts, and all that sort of nonsense, think there's no trouble so bad as that which makes a sheep baa because it gets the wrong side of the hedge to where its mate is. Now I've seen babes dwindle on the breast for want of nourishment, and I've seen the mother looked more comfortable when the crying stopped for good and all, and the baby's thin hands left off feeling for what it couldn't get. I've seen fine strong men die for lack of a pint of wine, and I've known women faint to death with weariness get up from childbirth and sweat

in the harvest-field, because they're fearful there won't be bread enough to go round, Lor' bless you, miss, your worries are but flea-bites compared to hunger and thirst and a tired back!"

Azalea paid little heed to the old crone's grumblings,—when were Love's beautiful eyes ever troubled excepting by selfish sorrow?—but sat and watched until the yellow noon turned to grey, and the early shadows of the winter's evening began to darken the air.

She grew very weary of her vigil, weary of those copper-coloured leaves that whirled round in the puddles, weary of the wind's ever-recurring sigh, weary of the robin who tried to sing down the noise of falling rain, weariest of all of that long path down which he did not come.

She wondered what had delayed him so long; she thought of business, of illness, of everything but the right cause.

Lady Di would have suspected incon-

stancy in delay, but distrust is an attribute of age and experience. And we are apt to gauge the faults of others by our own.

Sally broke in once more on her solitude.

"Here's a box of papers and all sorts of rubbish I found when cleaning out Master Moore's room; won't you amuse yourself in looking them over, Miss Azalea, and in burning what you don't like to keep. Maybe you'll find some little thing that might be of use to me," the old woman added, with a longing glance at the corner of a faded shawl which lay at the top of the box.

And Azalea, glad of any occupation which would require no mental exertion—for the brain does not care to labour when its friend the heart is ill—sat down beside the crazy-looking chest, and commenced emptying it of its contents.

She removed the shawl with reverent hands, for to it was attached a scrap of paper, on which was written, "My dear

Mary's wedding shawl." There were one or two other articles of woman's dress—a neutral-tinted ribbon, which had once been blue, and a pair of mittens. There was a bunch of dead flowers, too, which crumbled into dust when it was moved. "The posy she gave me when we made up our quarrel" was inscribed on the paper which enveloped the sapless stalks; then came a tiny shoe, emblem of a bitter pang, the pang which is most grievous of all to endure, the pang which seems to wrench heart from body, when the parent sees the flesh of his flesh, and the blood of his blood, wither and pale in death, and his anguish turns to blasphemy, and he rebels against the Providence which seems to him to sin against its own laws.

These relics were the indices of the path George Moore had trod in the past—a disused highway, unmarked, save by a few ruined fragments of worm-eaten sign-posts. The sound of wedding chimes, and the toll

of the death bell—the tender murmur of love, and the sad whisper of sobs.—The contents of the box echoed these, and Azalea felt her eyes fill with tears as she bent with awed face over the mementoes of the drama in which the dead man had played.

“I won’t look at them any more,” she said; “they make me miserable;” but as she prepared to close the lid, her eye fell on a packet which was labelled “Azalea’s mother.” Her mother! Her mother whom she never remembered to have seen, of whom Moore would rarely speak, and who had left no trace behind her which her child might cherish. Was it possible that, after all these years of estrangement, she had at last found some link which might bring her nearer to that sacred presence? She forgot Moore, Thurstan, everything, in the surprise which made her thrill with strange delight; the awed delight of one who, after long years, meets with a dear face he had deemed to be sleeping in

death. She unfolded a small square paper which held a lock of soft, pale hair, and this she kissed gently and put in her bosom. Of course it was her mother's hair; it was very like her own, only that it was dull, and hers had all the sheen of vitality. Then she read the letters; they were few in number, but they were the keys of the past, and they revealed to her secrets which it had been well, perhaps, that she had never known. In searching for memories of her dead mother, she discovered the existence of a living father. These letters had been written by Lord Orme to the love of his youth in years long past, and they not only afforded unmistakable evidence that he was the father of the girl who bore the name of Azalea Moore, but they also seemed to indicate that the young undergraduate had been bound by lawful ties to the yeoman's daughter whom he had loved so hotly in the days when he had neither wealth nor title.

As the truth dawned on Azalea through the confusion of her surprise, her heart grew hot with excitement. She had sought manna, and she had plucked rue; the first blight of age fell on her in this bitter hour of mortification. She had a father, then; not that dear old man who had supplied the place of one, and who lay in the churchyard yonder, but one who, living, was yet dead to her. It was not death, but unkindness, which had orphaned her. She had no love, no reverence to yield to this newly-found tie. The parent had ordained that he should be a stranger to his child, and, should they meet, it was possible that neither would recognise the other's face.

Azalea's life had been so solitary—she had received so little conventional training—that the wild animal within her had scarcely been duly tamed. One does not learn good breeding of birds, beasts, and flowers. Nature had given her intellect, and Douglas had strengthened it into almost

masculine vigour, but otherwise she had all the unsophistication of the savage. Had any one hurt her, she would have struck out at them, as she did when Thurstan Mowbray first kissed her; she had seen timid birds turn furies in defence of their young, and she would have imitated their example had aught under her protection been menaced. She had seen young things huddle up close to their mother's side for shelter, and she would fain have done likewise had she known where to seek her natural protector.

Had she been more civilised she would have understood that relations are superior now-a-days to those animal instincts which are relics of a savage state.

Conrad Orme only went to his father when he wanted a "fiver," and Rose and Amelia when they wanted new dresses; but Azalea, deprived of the advantages of a fashionable education, was so foolish as to think the parent and child should feel for

each other as tenderly as do wild animals and their young.

She rose from the perusal of these letters with her eyes dark with wrath. She was angered to her soul's depths. She revolted against the father who had done her the injury of renouncing her, and she felt shamed by the humiliation of his long neglect. As her eyes grew darker and her face paler with the pain of her thoughts, old Sally broke in once more on her solitude.

"Here's a gentleman wants to see you. Not Master Mowbray; an older man; he says that you know him, and that his name is Lord Orme."

Lord Orme followed close behind her, and Azalea, looking up, saw him hesitating on the threshold. It is possible that even then she might have fallen at his feet and craved his blessing and his love, but his first words fell like lumps of ice on the fever of her emotions.

"I am glad to find you in," he said, suavely. "I hope I do not disturb you, but I so wished to have a little talk with you about your father. He was a very old friend of mine. May I sit down?"

And Azalea, bowing, pointed to a chair, and said, with composure and dignity equal to his own, that she would listen to anything he had to say. She seated herself opposite to him, and thus father and daughter met, after an absence of five years.

For a moment there was a pause. For a moment human nature held civilisation by the throat, and choked down the glib courtesy of Lord Orme's tongue. He could see even in this dim light how fair the girl was —how like her mother in her beauty, how akin to himself in the refinement of her air and manner. Had he followed the prompting of that brief impulse he would have held out his arms to her, and called her to him. Then he remembered himself in time—remembered that such a revelation was not a

part of his scheme, and that he was not prepared to lay bare to the world the scandal of his youth.

“I was so grieved to hear of your father’s death,” he began.

“Thank you!”

Was it his fancy, or did her voice convey an expression of scorn. It was a hard voice, he thought, compared to her mother’s; *that* had ever sounded gently in his ears. He felt rebuffed; he scarcely knew why.

“I knew him so well,” he continued, apologetically. “You must allow me to feel an interest in you in his behalf. He was one of my worthiest friends.”

“He was my only friend,” she said, quietly.

Her companion winced.

“You do not forget that I would have been a friend to you had you permitted it. For your mother’s—I mean for your father’s—sake, I would have undertaken your education.”

"But you proposed that which was a sin against nature, Lord Orme. You proposed to separate father and child. No advantage can compensate for such a disruption of flesh and blood; no child would willingly consent to such alienation. I had no mother, and so I was less willing to resign the only human love and protection God had vouchsafed me."

Was this stern, beautiful woman, the child who, when he last saw her, had craved a farewell kiss, blushing and trembling at her own audacity?

He guessed nothing of the tie which linked her with Thurstan Mowbray, nor of the discovery she had just made with regard to himself. Love had made a woman of the girl, and the sense of injury now infused something of masculine power into the profundity of her indignation.

"A parent is not always able to be all that he would wish to his child," Lord Orme said, with a flash of self-vindication. He added,

more gently,—“I desired to benefit both yourself and Moore by that suggestion. Had you consented to it”——

“Had I consented to it,” she interrupted, “I should have been a heartless wretch. Surely, Lord Orme, you, who are yourself a father, cannot forget all that the name means?”

He looked down uneasily. He feared to meet her eyes, even though their brightness showed dimly through the shadows. Involuntarily he held out his hand towards hers, and as she felt that contact with kindred flesh and blood, the intonation of harshness melted from her voice; she spoke earnestly, for she was fired by a sense of intolerable wrong, and passion is the endower of eloquence; but something like reverence subdued her accents as she pleaded her cause, with that tender touch still blessing her hand.

“To be a father means, does it not, that a man has, in a measure, taken on himself the

responsibility of creating an immortal soul. Something lives and breathes, suffers or rejoices, is damned or is saved,—which, but for him, need never have existed. His blood runs in the veins of this something ; this duplicate of himself owns his trick of eyes, of voice, of gesture ; his heart beats in its bosom ; his evil passions are echoed in its vices ; or, happily, his virtues are psalmed in its well doing. Can a father pluck this thing from his bosom ? Can he cast it forth while yet it is helpless and conscienceless ? Can he, who should be its prop and its safeguard, leave it, a chance waif, to be blown about by the great breath of the world ? My lord, as I was watching at the window just now, I saw a labouring man going home from work. He was tired and stiff with the strain of hours of weariness ; he could scarcely crawl to where food and rest were awaiting him ; but when a child, a few years old, who toddled by his side, cried out that its foot was hurt against a stone, and put up

its arms to ‘Daddy,’ Daddy shouldered it, with a look which almost seemed to make ill-favoured poverty divine, so lovely was the love with which he forgot the sore distress of fatigue when he carried the added burthen as though it were a blessing. I think that had I known such love as *that*, it would have pleased me better than all the advantages of the education you were so good as to offer me.”

He sat mute, overpowered by shame and wonder. Shame at the keen reproach her words implied, and wonder at the fervour and power of her language.

“It is a pity you were not a man,” he muttered at last. Perhaps the thought crossed his mind that it would have been well had foolish, bird-witted Conrad possessed the powers of mind which were so wasted on a woman.

“Forgive me if I have expressed myself too strongly,” she said, flushing. “I have only had men to teach me how to think and

speak. Is there anything more you wish to say to me?"

"Can I say anything which will give you pleasure?"

He had risen from his chair, but he still held her by the hand.

She bent down her head meekly on his wrist, and wetted it with her tears. There was nothing defiant or stern in her manner now. She was the woman, and filial in every gesture.

"There is one word," she faltered, "which might yet atone for all."

Perhaps he did not hear her, for her voice was very low. She felt shy of asking for what had been withheld from her so long.

"I am intruding on your time," he continued, hurriedly. "I will leave you; but if you would allow me, I should be so glad to assist you by any means in my power. For your dead father's sake, will you not let me be your banker?"

She recoiled from him with face ashy pale, sick with the pang of this last insult.

"Oh, God, harken to him!" she murmured. "I prayed him for bread, and he has given me a stone!" Then, with a desperate effort, she regained sufficient composure to speak calmly. "My requirements are not many," she said; "the poor and the solitary have few expenses. Circumstances have occurred which make me independent of your lordship's bounty. I will now bid you good-bye."

He hesitated. How much did she guess or know? Should he confess all, and ease his conscience of its burthen? He thought he would, if he could see his way to such a course—but not yet; he would wait a few weeks. Besides, how could he go back to Holme and announce to his daughters and his friends that the girl who kept the house at Auriel was his eldest and legitimate daughter, and, failing male succession, the heiress to his title. His error had never

seemed so black to him as now, when he was most tempted to expose it to the world. He shrank from the idea of such exposure. He could not face it yet, he thought, but he would do it eventually. When he got back to Brighton she should come and stay with him. Rosa and Amelia would become familiarised to her, and better able to bear the shock in store for them; and she, on her side, might learn to love him, and forget in that love the neglect that she had sustained at his hands.

Meanwhile, her coldness of manner repressed any further demonstration of interest. He held out his hand, but she did not seem to perceive it.

“ You will hear from me again,” he said; but she answered not a word. He was too confused and troubled to pay much attention to her manner, but walked slowly from the house, feeling very much as if he had suffered a severe moral flagellation.

He bowed with mechanical courtesy as he passed the window at which she was standing, and then he went on towards the avenue. He paused once, fancying he heard a cry that sounded like “Oh, father! father!” but he reasoned himself out of the delusion. It was probably a trick of his imagination, or the wail of a bird. He decided that it was a bird, and pursued his way towards the misty gloom of the avenue. He moved towards the gate, and in another moment would have passed through it, when she suddenly darted to his side, and clasping his arm with her hands, cried, in an agony of entreaty,—

“Father—if you be my father—own me as your child. You have offered me alms when I wanted your love. Cannot you give me a little love? Do you not owe it to me as a sacred right?”

He hesitated.

“Oh, speak!” she urged. “Tell me truth, Lord Orme; am I an orphan? Will

you not own your own flesh and blood?
Are you not, in truth, my father?"

"No!"

The word seemed to burn his lips as he uttered it. No one answered him; no one questioned his truth; but the uneasy conscience of a sensitive nature hears an accusation even in the pulse of silence. The pale river, the wind, and the mist; the unseen bird piping a few last faint notes on the bough overhead, all whispered,

"You have lied."

He flushed with shame, as though these unconscious witnesses to his perjury were the condemning voices of the poor human world, which is ever as prompt to condemn as to err.

For some time past he had acted a lie, but now he had spoken one, and the sound of it was a humiliation to his ears. Lord Orme had always held that a man loses all dignity when he condescends to say that which is not; that no man who has thus erred can

ever again accord himself honour or respect, and that self-depreciation is as fatal to moral stamina as the consciousness of a sprained tendon is to a racehorse. He lingered a moment at the gate, sorely perplexed and troubled. If the girl had but consented to receive some benefit at his hands, he would have felt better reconciled with himself.

But "later I will make full amends to her," he thought, forgetting that life is too short for compensation.

He walked on a few steps, then paused, and returned near to that dimly-seen face weeping by the gate.

"Do not grieve—things will come right by-and-bye," he said vaguely; "meanwhile pray do not mention to anyone the idea you have taken into your head about—about me!"

"There is no fear of that," she answered passionately. "I can never tell to human ears that I have a father who disowns me, but I shall pray to God to let me forget it."

And Lord Orme went on his way ill at ease, fancying that he heard another voice mingled with the reproaches of the wind and the stream—the voice of the girl's dead mother echoing, " You have lied."

CHAPTER VII.

OF SWEET CAME SOUR, OF DAY CAME NIGHT.

WHEN the day came for Thurstan Mowbray to rejoin his regiment, his faith in Lady Di was re-established, his admiration of her beauty was increased tenfold ; and she, while she could not but scorn him for his folly, was yet sufficiently enamoured of her triumph to wish to retain it a little longer. She left Essex some few days before he did, and, after she and the Orme party had made their adieux to their host, a parting took place in a secluded nook of the back drawing-room, of which no one was cognizant save the two people concerned.

“ You will come and see me next week?”

“ How can you doubt it; but may I not come sooner ?”

“ No,” Lady Di said, she should not be free to see him alone until that day. “ Amelia and Rosa Orme are to stay with me,” which was true, Lady Di having inflicted on herself the company of the Misses Orme for policy’s sake. She wished to keep them out of their father’s way for the present; she wished him to feel as lonely as possible for the first two or three days after parting with her.

“ I shall write to you,” Thurstan said; and then he kissed her, whispering, “ the joy of my life is come back to me with you; you are the only woman I ever loved.”

She disengaged herself from his embrace, and hurried away. Aloud she said to him,

“ Good-bye, my darling.”

In her heart she whispered,—

“ What fools men are !”

Captain Mowbray wrote his letter, and, as ill-luck would have it, he wrote it at Auriel, and then he dropped it; and having some other letters in his pocket, he went off to the post-office, and never missed the most important epistle of the lot. Truly, as Lady Di said, “men *are* such fools!” As he rode off, old Sally, standing in the doorway, saw the white envelope flutter into a puddle of black mud. She picked it up, and, in her vigorous efforts to cleanse it, she rubbed off nearly all the sodden outside. Having done what mischief she could, she quietly placed it on the table in Azalea’s little sitting-room, and retired without waiting to see her young mistress, and explain how it came in her possession.

Thus it happened that when Azalea came in from a romp with her dogs, blooming and fresh as any rose that gets brighter and more perfect every day in the sunshine, she saw only a smudged-looking paper, on which was a good deal of Thurstan’s handwriting.

It was a long letter, full of adoration to his absent love; slightly tinged by depreciation of the poor little girl “of whom you needn’t be jealous, Di, for I swear to you that I never loved any woman as I do you ;” it touched on the repentance he felt at having so shackled himself before he knew that he might yet be happy enough to win the one he most loved; it deliberated as to whether it would ever be possible for him to get free from this poor child, whom he would endeavour to make happy in some other way, any way, in fact, but that which necessitated his being severed “from you who are all in all to me,” and it ended with saying—

“ To-morrow, oh my darling ! I shall see you and kiss you again.”

A brutal letter—could he have dreamt of whose eyes would see it—but he did not—and moreover, he probably did not mean half of what he said ;—the morbid fascination this woman had for him had warped

his better nature, but surely he would never have written thus, could he have looked on his young wife's face as she read his words and realised what they meant.

Drifts of purple-grey clouds floating over the face of a yellow-wan sky; a blaze of crimson behind the moving shadow of the mill; spectre-like groups of trees, under which were strewn gaunt branches, broken off by the wind's fury; a throng of rooks blackening the shadowy summits of the elms, and waving slowly to and fro with the movement of their frail homesteads—all these Azalea saw without heeding; neither mind nor eye seemed to take note of surrounding objects; yet for days after she sickened at the glow of sunset, and was haunted in her dreams by the movement of the windmill.

Now, as the grey clouds deepened to purple, and the sun passed away for ever from this day, Azalea was only conscious that the night was coming, and that the

increased gloom accorded with the darkness of her soul.

Rage, the quick flash of passion which fires a generous heart when it first leaps with anguish at the stroke of unlooked-for injury, had died away in her breast, and dull anger smouldered in its place ; to pierce its density came such wild thrills of anguish, that she prayed for unconsciousness, for death, that she might lose the knowledge of her pain ; she loathed the quiet pictures on the wall that stared with changeless expression at her hot living agony. She could have beaten the air with her hands, to force it away from her mouth ; she pressed her face against the window-pane, looking with blank face at the dull sky, and cursed in her thought all the past happiness, all the sweet days of her lost youth. She laughed at their remembrance with a bitter scorn ; the sunshine, the love, the happiness, all had been one vast cheat ; the thought of those old hours might never make her cheek glow,

her eyes shine with tenderness again. She had bartered all, all, for them, and now her own cruel self-contempt mocked her credulity.

The touch of the letter in her hand seemed to wither her heart, as a green leaf is shrivelled by fire. Hours appeared to have passed since she read those few careless words that had so changed her face. Tired out by excess of mental suffering, she laid her head down on the faded sofa, which stood in the window recess, and fell into a sort of stupor. She remained motionless for some little while, listening to the surging in the air, and looking mechanically at the last wan streak in the western sky : when a distant sound of clattering hoof-treads and the barking of dogs brought back vivid consciousness of her pain.

“How shall I meet him ?” she thought, “how look at his face, knowing all I know ?”

Her soul rebelled against him, as she

heard the cheerful whistle, the quick, light step, that heralded his approach through the long corridors.

She withdrew further into the shadow of the alcove, and watched the door through which he must enter.

He came in speaking bright and cheerful.

“I thought I never should get back!” he began; “the mare lost a shoe, and—oh, Azalea! where are you, Azalea?”

His voice fell in his disappointment at not finding her there. At any previous time she would have felt her heart bound with pleasure at such a tone, and would have rushed to meet him, with arms clasping round his neck, with lips pressing soft quick touches on his brow, cheeks, and mouth—now she sat crouched in that far off shadow, her hands stiff, her eyes fixed and bright; and in her mind nourishing an evil thought against the unconscious man who was basking in the kindly light of the fire. Hitherto she had been like one under

the spell of a nightmare. In the dark hours of dreams she had often felt her feet and arms paralysed in the face of some awful peril, from which they would fain fly. She had wept and prayed in vain for power to move her helpless limbs, and had only been released from the oppression of her position by waking to the brightness of the morning sun. But this was pain no happy dawn could ever clear away. And when the full consciousness of her position burst on her soul, when the sound of his soft voice broke on the amazed silence of her sorrow, when she knew that for evermore she must loathe that voice once so dear to her, must shrink from that face—for the sight of which she had longed with inexpressible tenderness when absent—had kissed with kisses that took her whole heart with them to his cheek when present; then indeed she felt as if the earth had suddenly turned to hell; that unseen powers were scourging her with pain sharper than she could bear.

“Oh!” she moaned, “let me die, let me die!”

Her hands fell by her side, and the slight rustle of her dress attracted Mowbray’s attention. He moved from the hearth-rug, still whistling a snatch of the air which had haunted him all day; it was a song Lady Diana had taught him, and the thought of how soon he should meet her had involuntarily brought this remembrance of her to his lips.

“Azalea,” once more he called; but Azalea fled by him as he spoke, and although he made a snatch at her dress, he could not succeed in stopping her.

“The little cat,” he said, half amused, half indignant; “does she think I am going to hunt after her all over the house?”

Then with a smile of satisfaction he added, “she will soon come back again.” He settled himself comfortably in an arm-chair, and as he watched the leaping flames with tired, sleepy eyes, his thoughts travelled plea-

santly away in the direction of London. In a delicious reverie he fancied himself sitting near Lady Diana's chair ; his arm creeping round her waist ; his lips hovering near her own : then he would start suddenly, fancying he felt Azalea's arm about his neck, and her hand holding his ; but it was only the curtain flapping near his head, and when he looked at his hands they were empty. So he dozed again, and at last settled into sleep with the happy conviction that both women were heaping caresses on him, and yet he was sorely puzzled, thinking "what a rage they'll both be in when I wake up !"

Azalea passed, with stumbling feet and bent head, through the dark passages that led from the room where Mowbray basked by the fire, to the back-door of the house ; habit—that trick of custom which asserts its supremacy even during those periods when human souls are sustaining the keenest agony they are capable of experiencing—habit made her put out her hands before

her to guard her head from concussion with any unseen object.

She reached the back-door at last, and pulling back the heavy bolts, paused on the threshold, awed for an instant by the calm beauty of the scene before her. The moonlight was shining brightly down the court-yard; the deer's head, the antlers of which stood in shadowy abruptness over the old-fashioned clock, was steeped in the cold brightness; the sombreous groups of trees that rose up behind the old-fashioned gables; the distant baa of a sheep disturbed in the fold—all spoke of serenest peace.

A heart less bitter would have been calmed by the solemn loveliness of the scene. But Azalea was suffering the agony of the dying. It may be cruelly hard for one who yearns to live, to yield up the last breath that divides the living day from the awesome darkness of the night which "knows no morning." But when death is in your heart; when the last throb of faith is sobbed

out, and the warmth of a great love turns to ashes; when passion treacherous and subtle still lingers to sting the old wound into agony, is not that harder to endure than a mere sighing out of failing breath, a simple surrender of all physical sensation? Azalea walked quickly through the courtyard. She dreaded observation or comment on her movements. She need not have feared either, her lover was still dozing by the fire. Old Sally was peering over her needle-work in the kitchen chimney corner. The watch-dog barked as she passed; the cold worm on the path writhed under her hasty feet,—but these were the only living things affected by her movements. She walked quickly through the dew-wet glooms of the avenue, and only paused when she came to a shadow more dense, a spot more secluded than any which she had yet penetrated, and there she flung herself down on the grass, she clenched her hot hands in the cool herbage, and turned the agony of her eyes

towards the stars ; their serene indifference exasperated her. She asked herself fiercely why all should be so calm when her heart was in torment. She moaned aloud in her pain, and then she cast her face to the earth and cried, "Oh, my love ! my love !"

The adjuration was addressed to a memory rather than a reality. The words were no sooner past her lips than she knew them to be a lie. She had no love now. All was frustration and barrenness.

"Oh," she said, "is there no end to this ? Cannot I die and cease to feel ?"

Looking up, she caught sight of the light that glimmered in the library window ; her eyes softened for an instant as she involuntarily pictured to herself the graceful head of her lover, thrown back on the cushioned chair, the eyes closed in sleep, the full lips half-opened under the shadow of the drooping moustache. She was seized with an irresistible longing to go and look in at the window. Her love was outraged, her heart

bruised, but she was a woman, and she could not keep away from the hand that had dealt her mortal agony.

Thurstan was still sleeping when Azalea reached the house. She leaned back in the framework of magnolia-leaves which fringed the casement, and looked at him long and steadfastly. Presently he stirred and called her name.

“Are you not coming?” she heard him say.

A strange smile played round her pallid lips as she passed round the house and re-entered the portal.

“Yes, I am coming,” she said softly to herself.

Thurstan was in high spirits to-night. He hummed snatches of song as he lolled on the old damask sofa, his arm folded round Azalea’s waist, his head pillow'd on her breast.

The fire blazed cheerily on the hearth. The revolving shadow of the mill, the darkening night, and the eerie gusts of

wind that wailed through its cloudy gloom, were shut out by the ruddy sheen of high crimson satin curtains.

A faint smell of dead flowers came from a vase that stood on a small table near Azalea.

“ You have not put fresh ones in to-night,” Thurstan said, referring to the shrivelled leaves he was crumbling in his disengaged hand.

“ No,” she answered, quietly, “ I did not pick any flowers to-night.”

“ What have you been doing, sweet?” he asked, yawning slightly. He was so good-tempered, he could afford to feign an interest he did not feel in her proceedings ; but he might have spared himself this little effort of politeness, for Azalea did not hear, or, if she heard, did not heed his question.

Could any lorn wayfarer have peeped in at the casement, his heart would have throbbed with envy at the apparent luxuriousness of the scene within.

Dusky grapes were piled up in an old china dish near Thurstan's hand, and in the exuberance of his content he dangled the misty berries before Azalea's face, rubbing off the bloom against the pale lips which refused to open and receive them, and then swallowing them himself, between the pauses of his song.

The room seemed o'erbrimming with comfort. Even Thurstan was dimly affected by the sensuous repose of the hour.

"I almost wish that I were not going to-morrow," he sighed.

"Stay, then," Azalea said. They were the first words she had spoken this evening, but Thurstan had been too pre-occupied to observe her silence.

"Do you wish me to stay?" He looked into her face with a sudden access of passion thrilling his heart and brightening his eyes. He would have drawn her towards him, but she averted her head and quietly disengaged his arms from her waist.

"I do not know," she said ; and this time he was struck by the faintness of her tones.

" You are tired," he said, kindly. " It is bed-time. Shall I carry you up-stairs ? "

She shook her head, so he passed before her, and bounded lightly up the dark oak steps, singing and smiling as he went.

His heart was holding festival to-night, while hers was black with storm.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOVE TURNED TO TEARS, AND TEARS TO FIRE.

THE night was far advanced, and Thurstan slept soundly, happily unconscious of all the tragedy in the wakeful face bent over his.

She had watched him thus for some hours; he had drawn her head to his shoulder and bade her lie there, and she obeyed at first, but as soon as he slept she sat up again, feeling as if she were suffocated by his touch. The blank dullness of her pain was passing away. She no longer stared at his face without meaning. She no longer asked herself, “Is

it so?" In those dark hours the doubt had strengthened into terrible distinctness. She looked at his hand still warm with the clasp of her own, at his lips which had lately sought hers with a sleepy good-night kiss; in her heart she repelled the treachery of his caresses and loathed the cheat he put on her.

" You are false—false—false," she said.
" Your face is hateful to me."

He turned his head into the line of a moonbeam that streamed across his pillow, and a wild thought came into her mind.

" Supposing that moonbeam could kill you. Supposing that you were to die to-night, that you could not move again. Suppose, Thurstan, that I were to make you so that she could never hear your footstep, or blush at your voice, or return your kisses excepting in memory. I should grudge her the memory, though, and should have to kill her, so that she might not think of you."

How handsome he looked as he slumbered thus—the moonlight shining on his close-curled head, round throat, and noble outline of chest,—the somewhat stern character of his beauty softened by the pathetic helplessness of sleep.

“He was not meant to die yet,” she mused, as she leaned her chin on her hand and watched him with white face and burning eyes.

He was not meant to die yet, she thought, not until he had worn out all that strength, until his full voice was cracked and thin, his bright eyes dull, and his firm steps feeble ; but if he died now he would tell no more lies, would die in the bloom of manhood, in her arms, hers would be the last kiss he felt—he should never rise from that bed to meet another woman’s welcome.

The dark thought was standing out clear in her mind now ; that which her heart foreboded when she heard his careless

laugh by the fireplace downstairs, was now fashioned into a determination.

“He must die, he must die,” she repeated to herself, and the clock that chimed on the stairs, and the branch that beat against the window-pane, seemed to echo her words. She started when she heard a faint chirrup and stir in the elm-tree outside. “It will soon be morning,” she thought. She unclasped his hand gently from her arm, and laid it by his side; then she slid away from the bed and felt her way to the pistol-case that stood on the drawers near Mowbray’s head.

“I always said it was dangerous, keeping loaded pistols in the room, but Thurstan liked to have some protection in this lonely old house—he did not think who would use them against him—but then he should not have murdered me first.”

She stole back noiselessly, her delicate little hand overborne by the weight of the deadly instrument it carried, and then she

crept into bed and looked again at the sleeper.

“ Why should he not die ? ”

This man had been the only human thing she had ever cherished. No mother's hand had ever blessed her head, no sister had laughed and wept by her side during youth's April season of blithe joy and impulsive sorrow. But she did not feel that she had missed anything from her life after she knew Thurstan Mowbray. She reverenced his slightest word; her vivid sympathies had made his wishes her own. She lowered her fine intellect by striving to bring it to the level of his narrow capabilities. She cared not for heights he could not ascend. She took no pleasure in perceiving a poetical when he could only see a practical aspect.

So far from feeling discomfort at being misunderstood, it was the constant endeavour of her heart to restrain the soarings of a mind that was apt to range

above the scope of her lover's mental vision.

Some women had loved Thurstan Mowbray for the benefits they had reaped from his hands ; others had fed his vanity with ephemeral devotion, born of lust and idleness ; many had given him love-tokens worth gold and silver ; but this woman had trampled down her mind at his feet, and every faculty of her being rejoiced in the sacrifice—if sacrifice it could be called ; for her whole heart gloried in its consummation. He was all in all to her ; she prized even her beauty only because it pleased him ; she exulted in life only when the day was brightened by his presence. She would not have cared if all the hours of his absence had been struck out of her total of existence ; without him her heart ached with heaviness ; with him she was as a bird mad with joy because spring has come.

All the divine fervour with which a southern worshipper lays her best and

purest thoughts at the feet of some imaged deity ; all the intense half-savage tenderness with which a wild animal cherishes its young, this desolate woman had lavished on him who was the one life of her life, the alpha and omega of her existence. And now she was watching him there, while the dark hours slipped into grey, and asking her heart why her hand should not murder all the beautiful part of her life, since it had turned into treachery, foulness, and falsehood. Why should those dark eyes open again to look a lie into her own ? Why should he ever know light or speech again, since he had made light loathsome and sound intolerable to her ?

Between his face and hers kept rising the glitter of two sentences. She could even see the shape of the letters, and recognise his handwriting ; but they quivered perpetually, so that they made her eyes ache. So she hid her face in her hands, and when she next looked up they

were gone ; but she heard them singing in her ears, "I never loved any but you :" "to-morrow I shall kiss you again."

"To-morrow I shall kiss you again," Azalea repeated vaguely ; then she touched his lips with a sort of tender pity. "No, they will never kiss living thing again ; they will be too cold and stiff ; but I shall kiss them, for then they will not be able to stab me with lies, to dishonour me by inconstancy."

The clock struck four. She looked hurriedly round.

"Supposing he were to wake," she thought ; "he would not let me do it."

She put her hand on the trigger of the pistol, and lifted it to a level with his breast. She leant over him, so that her hair fell in shadowy profusion over the pistol and over the warm heaving bosom it almost touched.

He might have withered her body with physical torture, and she would have kissed

him, smiling the while; he had cramped her mind, and she had hugged the mental fetters, judging them to be sweeter than crowns of honour; but against this injury the whole of her passionate nature rebelled; in proportion to the greatness of her love was the mightiness of its wreck.

When her thoughts first collected themselves from the miserable chaos of confusion and despair in which the discovery of his falsehood had plunged them, she had prayed, "Let me die."

But afterwards, when she again felt the magic of his touch, the caress of his lips, a fierce thrill of jealousy kindled her dull anguish into fury.

"Rather than have you touch her, rather than be left here alone to brood over her love passages with my other self, I would pass eternity in torment."

She never moved her eyes from his face when she put her hand down on that cold

little toy of iron, which was to turn sleep into death.

Her pale lips never quivered; the madness of much thought, the rack of intolerable suffering, had blighted all softer signs of emotion from her face. The tenseness of her agony found expression but in one idea,—

“He shall die!”

He lay there a model of manly strength and human beauty, helpless in his unconsciousness as a feeble infant. She steadied her hold on the pistol, and put the other arm about his neck. She thought she would kiss him and pull the trigger at the same moment. She would have the last embrace of his living lips.

She slid her fingers round his throat, and (Thurstan Mowbray never knew how near he was to solving the great *peut-être* in the grey dawn of this June morning) disturbed by the movement, or stirred by some vagrant dream, he turned towards her with

a smile, and putting out his arm, drew her hand and the deadly instrument it held, over his bosom ; then drooping his head on her breast, he relapsed again into deep slumber.

She stared at him with wild eyes as he gathered her in his arms. She felt her hand and that which it held sliding over the beating pulses of her heart. She raised herself and looked first at *it*, and then with a deep-drawn breath she bowed her face on his hands, and covered them with kisses, and her slender form was shaken by husky passionate sobs and tears. The unnatural strain had given way ; the fierce jealousy, the murderous resolve, all melted into a murmurous sound of caressing words, a rush of bitter tears.

“ Oh, my love, my love ; how can I help loving you ? Can I tear my heart from my body ? Can I blot out all the days and hours when I lived, and when you were my life ? for it is I that am dead. I am dead, Thurstan, and you have killed me.”

She removed the pistol gently from its proximity, so perilous to the sleeper, and replaced it in the case. Then she knelt down and tried to pray; to give thanks to Heaven for having preserved her from the commission of a great sin with its inheritance of bitter remorse; but in her heart she knew that it was not an inspiration of repentance, but her lover's unwitting caress that had held her hand from his destruction, and she did not dare to lift up her face to God, but after murmuring a mechanical formula of prayer, she rose and once more bent over her lover's head.

"I will never see you wake, not that I would hurt you," she added, with a shudder, at the memory of what her thoughts had been half an hour since; "but because I could not bear to hear your voice or to meet your eyes—the old frenzy might come back, and then you would not be safe from me."

Then her pale face, passion-warped and stained with tears, hovered an instant above

the sleeping man, and her lips closed on his in the last kiss she was ever to give human creature.

How much of despair, how little of sweetness, lived in that caress, those who have known the sore trouble of a broken heart can best tell.

Later in the morning, when Thurstan awoke and found there was no Azalea to attend him at his morning meal, he was naturally disturbed and irritated. He supposed that she had gone out for one of those early walks she was so fond of; he thought it very unkind and inconsiderate of her. She might have remembered that he was obliged to leave by an early train. He grumbled and fretted all breakfast-time; he even went to the window once or twice to see if she were coming, and then he swore, drank down his coffee, which was smoked (this adding to his feeling of injury), and taking out his watch, calculated how long he could afford to linger ere it would be

necessary for him to set out for the station. He waited until the last moment, and then started off; he would much like to have kissed her, ere he went. He would have liked by his caresses to atone in some measure for the injury of which he believed she was unconscious ; but he had appointed with Lady Di to meet her in town at a certain hour, and if he missed this train he would be too late. So he scrawled the following note to Azalea :—

“ Dearest little woman. Why are you not here to bid me good-bye ? I miss you dreadfully. If you want to write to me, address to the — Club. I would not leave by this train, but I have an important business engagement in London (how mean a detected lie makes a man seem !) which I cannot postpone. I do not expect to be able to get away again for some time, as I've had all my long leave out ; but be sure I shall come back to you as soon as I can.—Your ever loving, T. M.”

That night Douglas received a scrap of paper on which was written the word "Come."

The only words he uttered when he read this appeal were, "So soon!" and then he hastened to Auriel.

"Miss Azalea seems very ill," old Sally said, meeting him with a face more wearied than alarmed. Sally's life had been such a long-continued weariness that she was deadened to any keen phase of feeling. With her, and such as her, the lightning flash of emotion is rarely felt: the cloud only deepens.

The painful excitement of the last twenty-four hours had been fatal to a naturally delicate and highly sensitive organization, and Douglas found Azalea prostrated by the first symptoms of the fever called inflammatory.

"My head aches so, Robert," she moaned, as he stood beside her; "and I feel, oh, so weary."



He offered to send for Mowbray, but she showed such distress at the idea, that he did not again repeat his suggestion. It was not until she had been ill for several days—it was not until the doctor looked grave, and his own heart stood still with fear—that he thought it his duty to acquaint Mowbray of her danger. He wrote to the latter's address in London, but gained no answer, the truth being that Captain Mowbray had, by a great exertion of influence, induced the authorities to grant him a week's more leave, which week he was spending pleasantly at Paris, whither Lady Di Merton was also gone.

As Azalea's fever increased and delirium disordered her mind, Douglas could not but rejoice in Mowbray's absence. To grant her a moment's pleasure he would have sacrificed his strongest wishes; but he could not conceal from himself that what little comfort remained to him in this her hour of danger, consisted in the fact of his

being her sole friend. In health and happiness she was Mowbray's. Now, in the depths of her physical and mental distress, he could claim her his.

"This fever is technically called Synochres," the doctor said, between his pinches of snuff. "If she has any other friends, I would advise you to send for them."

CHAPTER IX.

THOU HAST FINISHED JOY AND MOAN.

“ Robert ! ”

“ My darling ! ”

“ Send those people away.”

“ There is no one here, darling. No one
but Robert.”

“ Take care of me, Robert.”

“ I will ; I do. You know I do. Look at
me, Azalea. See, I have got your hand.”

His harsh voice melted into a murmur of
ineffable tenderness as he knelt down and
clasped his hand in the girl’s slender fingers.

She withdrew them slowly ; her thoughts

seemed variable and insequent as the autumn leaves that whirled past the window. For a while she looked down thoughtfully on some flowers Douglas had placed near her pillow ; she drew them towards her, and stared at them with curious intentness, then she commenced hastily plucking them to pieces.

“These are the people who have been unkind to me,” she said, hurriedly. “Let us destroy them and fling them away. No, don’t fling them away,” she added, suddenly, in a tone of gentle courtesy. “You see, Robert, the scent is oppressive, and it would be better to put them out of the room because I am ill, you know.”

These sudden recalls of reason, the struggle of her mind to reassert its power, and the effort to conceal its weakness, were more terrible to Douglas than her wildest hallucinations; his heart felt to be breaking. Flinging himself on his knees, he looked up with all his soul’s agony concentrated in

his eyes. "Oh Father," he cried, "restore her mind. Give back the one Godlike attribute of our nature. How can I comfort her, when her thoughts have wandered beyond the pale of human reason? How can I tell her of Thee when she is as heedless of my meaning as the vilest brute creature of Thy earth."

"Are you looking at the sunset?" Azalea said softly. "I think there will be rain to-morrow; the sun is setting behind a bank of clouds. It is very late. I shall go to sleep."

She turned on her side, and Douglas lifted away, reverentially, the long trails of loose fair hair that fell over her face with the movement. Her beautiful tresses had the dull blight of illness on them; but to Douglas they were lovelier now than in the old days, when they glistened like spun gold in the sunshine, and danced in every sigh of the wind.

She slumbered for a while a short uneasy

sleep; and Douglas sat watching her, his face calm, but dark with restrained pain. He dared not relieve the savage agony of his grief, by allowing his breast to shake with one sob, or his eyes to be dimmed for an instant, lest she should wonder at and ask the cause of his trouble. He could only sit there assuming a look of content whenever she turned her face towards him, and meeting the wistful doubt in her eyes with a reassuring smile.

Such smiles they were!—they seared his face with deeper wrinkles, and mocked him in the opposite mirror with their ghastly reflexions of assumed mirth. Such smiles as a mother gives to the terrified glances of her babe when it sobs out its innocent life in the agony of a fell disease; such as those with which the Israelitish General may have greeted the welcoming eyes of his doomed daughter; such smiles as are fraught with sharper pain than our hottest tears—were these which this man gave as

a tribute to the last and greatest love of his life.

Ere she had slept many minutes, Azalea awoke, panting, her eyes dilated and anxious.

“Oh!” she cried, “Topaz is running away with the wind over the hills, and I can’t catch him, he goes so fast; he will run into the clouds, and then he will never come back.”

“I will stop him,” Douglas said, soothingly; “I will go after him at once. But oh, Azalea!” he added, with a breaking voice, “why do you look at me so—don’t you know me?”

She turned the strangely lustrous eyes on him, and, staring at him fixedly, said,—

“Not in the least; but I am happy to make your acquaintance. I suppose they have sent you to take me away? It is too soon; I will not go yet.”

“Oh! not yet—not yet; God forbid that it should be yet!” Douglas said, bowing his

face on her hands, and kissing them with despairing tenderness.

A shy smile irradiated her wan face.

“ You must be Thurstan,” she whispered. “ No one but Thurstan loved me like that; he was my husband, you know.”

“ It is—it is time for you to sleep,” Douglas stammered, as he gently let her hands free. “ It is bed-time; try and sleep now.”

“ I always seem to be going to bed,” she muttered impatiently. “ Why do I never get up in the morning? I shall get up to-morrow, and feed the birds myself.”

Presently she flung her arms up in a paroxysm of terror.

“ I cannot see,” she cried; “ take me to the light.”

The room was ablaze with candle-light; and Douglas became nearly frantic at the sight of her vehement agitation, and the inefficacy of his efforts to prove to her that she was not in darkness.

"Oh, it is all dark—so dark," she moaned; "and I shall be lost. He will never find me any more."

She struck her arms out wildly, crying that "*It* was coming after her again." Then she clung convulsively to Douglas, entreating him to save her, not to let *it* take her away down the dark road between the clouds.

"Azalea, my child, it is nothing," urged Douglas, in the extremity of his distress. "Nothing shall touch you, nothing shall harm you."

But his heart stood still when he remembered how near the silent enemy was to the shrinking form in his arms—an enemy no prayers could appease, no terror move; an enemy from which not all the dumb anguish of his imploring eyes, nor the passionate throbings of his aching heart, could shield her,

She sank down at last, shuddering violently; still clutching his hands and

entreating to be taken to the daylight. Douglas looked at the dark shadows of the deepening night, and prayed that she might sleep away the long, dreary hours that must elapse before the first grey tint of dawn crept up behind the black fir-grove.

She was quiet at length from sheer exhaustion, but her eyes were still alert and anxious; and the drawn, pale face quivered painfully as her gaze followed every waver of the flickering candle flame. The miserable, heart-weary watcher poured out a few drops of sedative and held it to her lips. The kindly draught lured the troubled spirit to rest, and in a few minutes Douglas had the negative satisfaction of seeing the drawn face relax, and the distended eyes soften in the shadow of sleep.

During the lagging hours that followed, Douglas sat motionless, his haggard face turned towards the window. He dared not look long at the wreck of the creature he so loved, lest his composure should give

way, and she be startled from slumber by his passion of lamentation. He cursed the hours that were slipping away so fast, bearing with them the last minutes of her numbered hours ; he cursed the darkness that crawled so heavily over tree and meadow, sky and water ; and yet more he loathed the thought of the dawn, which might rise for him alone.

She was dying—his darling “was dying—dying—dying ;” he repeated the word to himself in a monotonous whisper ; and as he whispered it, he locked his hands one in the other until the indentation of his finger-nails drew blood. He had seen death before ; he had seen it come by strange chances to men when they had been full of mirth and proud in strength ; he had seen it waste their noble thews and sinews into the weakness of a child’s limbs. He had seen it met with resignation and with blasphemy,—with mad terror and with peaceful joy. He knew its every aspect, and he had

learnt only too well to recognize its infallible signs.

He would have given all his worldly wealth to any man who had said to him to-night, "Yet hope;" but in his heart he knew that the look had come to Azalea's face which comes but once in life, and that when life is ebbing into death—a look weird-like, but not unlovely, full of strange pathos, as if the perishing flesh rebelled against its approaching dissolution, yet with the foretaste of immortal peace on the serene brow and in the tranced, lustrous eyes.

For some hours she slept quietly, undisturbed by the beating of the ash boughs against the window, or by the loud surging of the rising wind. A storm was thickening the cloudy darkness, and without all was turmoil and confusion. Sudden bursts of rain and hail dashed violently against the window-panes; streams whirled down the water-pipes, wearying Douglas's ears by their monotonous splash. With that

curious cognizance of detail which a mind tense with supreme suffering sometimes exhibits, he thought how perturbed must be all the thousand tiny inhabitants of the pipe's hollow, which, having nestled there for warmth and shelter, where now dislodged by this unexpected deluge. How fast the flat wood-louse was running over the leaden ridges—how rapidly the spider was swinging up his flight from that dreadful chasm, leaving his half-dissected fly to be swept away by the torrent!

Then his thoughts wandered away to far-off scenes. He imagined to himself how loudly the sea must now be roaring over sands and rocks. He pictured wild flights of sea-gulls whirling amidst the foam, portents of storm and disaster. He remembered one dark night of storm, years and years ago, when he had seen strong men sucked down like wafts of sea-weed under the great waters. He thought what they must be now, his whilom friends and

companions, and shuddered at the thought. At least his darling would rest at peace in an earthly bed ; he would know where to seek her ; her sleep should be guarded by gay flowers and sculptured effigy. Better so, than to be tossed in annihilation by the eternal recurrence of moaning waves.

He was aroused from his vague meditations by the sound of a low, mirthless laugh. His heart seemed to grow suddenly numb, and then to bound into a thousand mad pulsations. Azalea was awake, and was pointing with her finger towards a distant corner of the room.

“ Isn’t it strange ? ” she whispered ; “ he dances there every night with the princess. He says he does it on purpose to amuse me ; but it does not amuse me ; it hurts me dreadfully.” These last words escaped her lips with a sharp cry of pain.

“ Oh ! ” she moaned, “ it hurts me so much, so much ! ” She put her hand to her side, and panted with agony.

Douglas brought a flannel steeped in embrocation, and placed it gently over her chest.

"That is better," she sighed. Then she turned herself on her side, and faced the window.

"Open the shutters, Robert," she said presently; "the light is coming. I hear the birds singing."

It was a dreary scene the open window revealed to them.

The wind was still storming through the wet leaves, and the rain had settled into a sullen mist, which hung thickly over the upland. The golden-brown and dapple-skinned cattle moved, dull, hueless shadows, through the white denseness of the meadow; the flat leaves of the water-lilies were ruffled and torn from their stems by the rush of the swollen stream. The moving sound of waters and the faint chirp of a bird were all that broke the stillness of the colourless dawn.

"Will he come, do you think?" Azalea said, in the hollow voice that had become habitual to her. "Do you see him coming?"

Then observing Douglas hesitate and look perplexed, she added, with asperity,—

"Take me to the window, and let me look for myself."

He pushed her bed in the direction she indicated, and she tried to raise herself up, but fell back, weeping with weakness and vexation.

"Lift me up," she wailed. "I cannot move by myself."

He propped her up on her pillows, and she inclined her head towards the casement, and rested her cheek on the pane.

"I can't see him," she said, after she had looked some time with eager, wistful eyes, in the direction of the avenue. "But, perhaps, it is because there is no sun."

She drooped down again among the cushions, and cried a little to herself.

Douglas bent down to hear what it was she was murmuring. The word was choked by quick breaths and sighs heavy with tears, but it sounded like "Thurstan," and Douglas drew back, stung by intolerable pain.

"Is it always to be so?" he thought, bitterly. "Is love and faith which endure to the end, to be nothing, compared with the passion which glorified an hour, but has left the whole of her life desolate? Will she never repay me for all, by giving me at least one of her dying thoughts?"

He felt stifled and weary beyond the power of endurance. He rang the bell and summoned old Sally to come and take his place for a few seconds by the sick-bed. Bidding her beckon to him immediately, should any change occur in the patient, he ran down-stairs, and went into the wet meadows, keeping, as he had promised, within sight of Azalea's window. The sullen coolness of the dim morning assorted

better with his feelings than the gaiety of sunshine could have done. He stooped down amongst the reeds, and dipped his head into the grey waters. Then he went into the old dilapidated conservatory, and felt about the tangles of the vine until he had detected some grapes riper than the others. She could not swallow them now; but they might serve to refresh her dry lips. He did not dare pluck her any of the roses that drooped heavy with rain-drops over the conservatory door. To her distempered imagination, the beautiful playthings of her youth appeared something menacing and fearful.

“Who could ever have thought that Azalea would be afraid of a flower?” Douglas reflected sadly.

“Sir, she is asking for you,” a feeble voice called from above; and in another second he was up-stairs again at her door. He was fain to pause when there. Something like dread held back his footsteps,

and accelerated the hurried beatings of his heart.

When he entered he met Azalea's eyes, and understood from their expression that she was conscious.

"I am better," she said, smiling sweetly as she spoke.

The old woman hurried from the room, weeping.

"Oh dear, dear," she sobbed. "To see that poor child smile with a face like that quite breaks my heart."

"Will you please give me a looking-glass?" Azalea continued, speaking the more deliberately from the difficulty she had in articulating.

He brought her a hand-mirror, and, taking it between her wax-like fingers, she looked at herself intently.

It was with a kind of wonder mixed with pathetic self-pity that she surveyed the reflexion of her altered features. What she beheld were pinched nostrils, drawn,

colourless cheeks, eyes gleaming with unnatural fire from their purple shadows, floats of pale, dull hair drooping forlornly over her shoulders.

“It don’t look like me,” she gasped.
“Take it away.”

Douglas removed the mirror, and she fell back on her pillow, and remained motionless for some time. Presently, after murmuring some inarticulate sounds, and with a great effort, she uttered one word distinctly. It was—

“*Pray!*”

At the same moment she endeavoured to clasp her hands together, and Douglas understood that at last the truth was clear to her, and that she knew she was near to death.

He helped her to twine the poor wax-like fingers together, and then he knelt down by her side. He judged that a familiar, well-loved formula would be sweeter to her ears than any other form of worship, and

he said the Lord's Prayer very slowly, for she was following the words with her lips, although they made no sound.

Her eyes half-closed, and such a change came over her face, that he leant over her, crying,—

“Azalea! oh, my darling—my darling!”

She looked up at him with a gleam of recognition in her eyes, and, putting out her hand, patted his bowed head kindly.

“Dear—old—Robert,” she said, slowly; “God—bless” —

She broke off with a slow sigh; but in these few words lay the recompense of all the years of suffering Robert Douglas had endured.

The dreamless sleep was creeping on her very fast now.

She did not speak again until the warm splendour of the sun streamed into the room and over her face.

Then she raised herself a little, and looked out at the broadening day.

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“The storm is over,” she said; “and even this—oh, Robert—this is death!”

As she spoke, her brow contracted, and earth’s last pang seized her.

CHAPTER X.

THE REST IS SILENCE.

WHEN the old servant next came to ascertain if her mistress required her services, she was struck by the solemn stillness that pervaded the chamber; a stillness unbroken by sigh or wail. On going near the bed, she found Douglas lying senseless over the body of the dead girl, his hand twisted in her long, fair hair; his cheek resting on the small, stiff fingers.

“How is she?” the old doctor asked, as he stood in the hall that evening, taking off his hat and gloves preparatory to making his usual visit up-stairs. He had asked

similar questions for these last forty years, but his wrinkled face saddened when the woman answered,

“She’s gone, sir.”

“How, and when?”

We all like to know the end of a story; from the sportsman who, from untoward accident, has been prevented seeing the finish of a run, to the *Æsculapius* who has watched his patient’s every halt on the road to death.

“Some time this morning. I can’t rightly say when, for I wasn’t in the room.”

The old doctor gave a sigh, and a reverent thought to the fair dead woman up-stairs, and then he turned on his heel.

“No further use for me,” he said; “I have some distance to go. Good evening.”

“Stop, sir, stop!” the old woman cried, panting after him to the door of his carriage; “Whatever am I to do with *him*? ”

“Him! I suppose you mean Mr. Douglas —he isn’t ill, is he? ”

"I don't think he is altogether in his right mind," Sally said, looking uneasily towards the open window above. When I first went into the room, I found him lying unsensed near the body. My son, Sam, was down-stairs, and I got him to come and lift the poor gentleman away, and attend to him while I dressed Miss Azalea for the last time."

"Well, now?"

"Mr. Douglas is sitting by her, and keeps stroking her hand, and talking just as if the poor thing could hear or answer him. I don't feel easy about him, sir. I wish you'd come and look at him; perhaps you could give him something to do him good."

Dr. Randolph shook his head.

"I fear it's a case beyond me, Goody," he said. "The Great Maker will not all at once heal the wounds he thinks fit to inflict on us; however, I will come."

He entered the house again, and the

two ascended the stairs with stealthy steps.

Any hasty movement or violent sound would have jarred against the deep stillness of those lonely chambers.

They paused at the open door of the room where Azalea lay, and for some minutes stood in silent contemplation of the scene before them.

The time was sunset, and the face of the dead was all aglow with the red light ; the fair, girlish countenance wore an expression of ineffable pathos. The soft, small mouth was partly open, and drooped at the corners. The brows were slightly contracted. Azalea looked to be weary even in death. Her hands had been crossed over her bosom, but one was now displaced ; the other lay on her heart, as if enforcing the repose it had so desired.

“ Azalea, look at me—speak to me—oh, my love ! let me hear one word ! were it ever so unkind I could forgive it. Just for

the pleasure of hearing its sound. Why do you not speak, Azalea? Are you to be voiceless for ever? What have I done against you or Heaven that I should be cursed with this horrible silence?"

The speaker was Douglas; the harsh, broken voice—the wild, anxious gaze—the living, suffering, mutable face was his. She whom he adjured had lain before him motionless ever since noon, neither sleeping nor waking, neither grieved nor wondering at the strangeness of her state, neither hearkening to his plaint nor seeing the misery in his eyes.

The old doctor advanced to Douglas and touched his arm.

The latter looked round, with his finger uplifted.

"Hush!" he said, "she must not be disturbed."

"She cannot be disturbed," the old man said, gently. "She is dead."

"So they told me this morning," Douglas

answered, with a bewildered look in his big grey eyes ; “ but how can that be ? ”

Then he lifted up the lifeless hand.

“ It is very odd,” he murmured ; “ the fingers will keep closing as fast as I open them, and they seem, oh, so cold. Will you please feel her pulse ? ” he added, gravely.

“ My dear sir,” the elder man replied, much distressed, “ learn to know and bear the truth ; this poor girl’s pulse will never beat again.”

“ Perhaps you can tell me where she is,” the other said. “ I do not know where she can have gone. You see she is not here, or she would speak or look at me, instead of keeping her mouth fixed like that, and her eyes always staring the same way. I have fancied that I had made some mistake—that *this* might be some one else ; but these are the lineaments, this is the form that was Azalea’s, only the face looks strangely sad, and the flesh is shrunk. Yet if this were

she, it would arise and sing, and pluck flowers in the garden, and I should hear its laugh afar off, and the sound of its running feet."

"Come with me; come away a little while," pleaded Randolph.

"Excuse me, but I cannot do that," Douglas answered courteously. "While there is any doubt about it, I must stay and watch, in case it should move, and ask for me. A little while ago," he added, musingly, "I had no doubt but that it was she; but now I almost doubt her identity. If it were she, she would certainly answer me when I entreat it so earnestly. She had a passionate temper before she grew ill; but she was never long sullen. Where do you think she is?"

"With God," Dr. Randolph said, reverently.

"You mean in Paradise; but what is she doing there, and what is Paradise? We people it with earthly symbols, doctor;

we imagine harps and angelic musicians, decked with wreaths of amaranth, with which

"The spirits elect
Bind their resplendent locks, inwreathed with leaves."

But surely if the spirits are enshrined in earthly forms, no shape could be fairer than was Azalea's. Why should she discard her lovely features here to assume some unfamiliar aspect in heaven? Why did she not take with her the same face that I so loved? then I might hope to recognize it in the mighty realms of the awakened dead. How shall I know her, if she is nought but a sunshiny spirit, with lilies trailing in her hair, and clouds hiding her dear little feet? If she is in Paradise, doctor, sentient, loving, and lovable as she was on earth, would it not be kinder of them to let her cease from pulling ethereal harp-strings, and from practising celestial harmony, and allow her to breathe down a few words of comfort to me, just to relieve my troubled heart? Oh,

Azalea ! my darling, be merciful ; speak one word to me to lighten the great darkness of my soul. It is the uncertainty that maddens me."

" Will you come away, just for a few minutes ? " Dr. Randolph said, earnestly.

" Why should I come away ? " Douglas asked, fiercely. " What is there I should come for ? the problem is *here*."

" At least, drink this."

" I would rather not go to sleep " (shrinking from him, and looking suspiciously at the proffered draught). " It would be worse to go to sleep, and forget what she has become. What troubles me, doctor, is, that it is all so terribly unmeaning. Her eyes used to be ripe with expression, and now they are dim and vacuous ; her hands used to be so dainty and clever, and now they lie as helpless as if they were made of marble ; her feet were so quick, but they have remained in the same place for six long hours."

He seized hold of her hand and placed it on his forehead.

"Once, when I had a headache," he continued, "you put your cool hand here, and the touch was a heavenly balm which cured me; now your fingers are very heavy. I fear they won't make me better. They are more like the leaden weight which is to drag me down to hell."

"You *must* drink this!" Dr. Randolph said authoritatively. "Azalea wishes it."

"If she wishes it she can't be quite gone away," Douglas muttered. "I'll take it, darling, if it were hell's own fire."

He swallowed the draught, and the old doctor gave a long-drawn sigh of relief.

"I will call again in a little while," he whispered to Sally, "and we will get him to bed if possible."

Then he went down-stairs moralizing.

"Had it been a woman, she would have wept away half her grief by this time. Being a man, he has pressure on the

brain, poor fellow. I wonder if he'll pull through."

When Douglas was once more left alone with the dead girl, he bent over her, and whispered in her waxen ear,—

"I love you, Azalea, I love you."

And when, after some hours of heavy slumber, produced by the opiate he had taken, he awoke to find himself in another chamber, he arose, and staggered mechanically to the familiar room where the dead lay, calling,—

"Azalea! where are you, Azalea?"

* * * * *

"It is a dreary hour for her to take her last good-bye of Auriel in," Douglas thought, as he looked out of the window on the morning of Azalea's funeral. "Fate has not been kind to her, even on her burial day. I wish my darling could have been carried away in the sunshine."

He saw one or two dark figures looming through the mist in the avenue, and with a

shudder he walked up to the coffin, and kissed the plank that hid Azalea's face from him.

"They are come to take you away," he said. "They will take me too, my own; I shall be buried with you as surely as though I were lying stiff by your side."

There was no father to bow his face in solemn anguish over the shrouded form, no mother to wail tender grief through the empty rooms when the dark burthen had been carried out, and the dear presence had passed away for ever. Only old Sally had placed a few bright flowers in the hands which knew not what they held, and but one token of human regret was pressed on her forehead, and that was the last caress Robert Douglas ever gave to any living creature.

A low avenue of walnut-trees, bare, save for a few yellow leaves that shone and quivered in the stir of rain and wind; a dark shape carried down the churchyard path

by men whose footsteps fell softly on the golden drifts of sodden foliage. Tombstones, dull-grey in the wet and vivid-hued moss, that had crept over and obscured the humbler wooden records of the dead. The marble tomb of the Mowbrays, shining white in a small grove of cypresses, an open grave with fresh-scented heaps of earth crushing down the tall grasses by its side, and the low voice of a bare-headed priest, whose prayers were almost inaudible in the sob and rush of the storm.

Douglas asked himself, was this scene real, or was it a dull, hideous dream, from the incubus of which death alone could relieve him.

"He is an old man, that Mr. Douglas. I suppose he has acted in the place of a father to the deceased," the clergyman remarked to his clerk, when dressing himself in the vestry.

"He did not look so a year ago; he has got shrunk and bent lately. I don't think

he's past the prime of life," said the clerk, who was himself about Douglas's age.

"He wishes to remain here alone for a while; you may leave him the keys, Smith. Good morning." And as the clouds were darkening, and the rain falling more thickly, the priest and his assistant hurried away as soon as possible to the comforts and shelter of home.

"They have gone to their firesides," thought Douglas, as he watched their receding figures disappear in the mist; "they have gone to be welcomed by the laugh of their children and the loving care of their wives; they have their households on the warm side of the earth; with them the day is glad with sound and light, while you, my poor darling, are with darkness and corruption; your home is under wet weeds and sodden mould." For the first time since his great despair had come to him, he burst into a passion of weeping, and flinging himself down on the grave, sobbed out hot

tears and inarticulate moans on the heaped mound which was now the only symbol of Azalea's presence. "Oh, child!" he cried, "have we parted for ever to-day? and if not, how will it be with us when we meet again? Will your face be transfigured into an angel's, Azalea? and shall I distinguish the mortal features I loved through the splendour of your glorification? Will it seem but as yesterday that we parted? or shall I run to meet you with the same heart rapture as I should if you came forth from your grave now and said, 'Robert, take me home again; it is cold.' "

"Oh, God!" he added, bowing his face on his clasped hands, make my heart strong with faith; let hope redeem the anguish of this hour. I am sickened with fear. My heart has gone down into the grave with this woman. I dread lest infinite ages should roll on, and I still be severed from her. I dread lest measureless time and impenetrable silence should intervene between

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us. Thou knowest, and Thou alone, the vast mysteries of the imperishable hereafter. Comfort me, O Lord! comfort me and give me light!"

CHAPTER XI.

LO ! 'TWAS A GALA NIGHT.

ORME HOUSE was the wonder and admiration of the Marine Parade on this the evening of Miss Orme's wedding-day. The windows sparkled with light, and the air was glad with jubilant music. Even the ragged children in the street were infected by the spirit of rejoicing breathed by the festal strains, and they took hands and whirled round in circles on the pavement in uncouth imitation of the gliding shadows within.

"A prettier wedding, a gayer scene, had rarely been witnessed in Brighton," old gossips said, with approving nods of the head.

All the near friends of the family were present; these, of course, included both Lady Di Merton and Thurstan Mowbray. The day had been cloudless; sea and sky two vast sheets of blue, and in a blaze of sunlight which harmonized well with the exultance of the bridal party, Amelia Orme had passed from her father's door, her fair hair gleaming under clouds of lace-work, which trailed over robes of flowing white, while pure-hued flowers shone like white stars on her head and bosom.

A scent of crushed blossoms came from the strewn church-path, a glistening light of flowing draperies moved through the dim aisle, a bevy of fair faces were bent in prayer round the altar, and the ceremony having been performed by the bride's uncle with more than usual solemnity, and more than usual assistance, the Hon. Amelia Orme had returned to her father's house, the Duchess of Grandacre.

The presents to the bride were magni-

ficient. Had she married a poor man, and really required some substantial proofs of her friends' regard, she would have probably been inundated with kettle-holders, ink-stands, and many other varieties of such-like "nice useful things," but the future possessor of the Grandacre diamonds was not to be insulted by such paltry tributes ; her gifts were of the costliest description ; and every woman who looked at the superb bridal presents declared that Amelia must indeed be happy.

She *was* very happy, and not the sharpest speech from Rosa, who suffered somewhat from envy and its consequent uncharitableness, could ruffle her sister's serenity.

Joy of heart made Amelia amiable and comely. As Duchess of Grandacre she was pronounced to be beautiful ; while poor Rosa, not having been transmuted to duchessdom, was fain to remain that ordinary looking girl, Rosa Orme.

Lord Orme looked earnestly after the

travelling carriage which bore away the newly-married couple.

"I never saw a better-matched pair," he murmured; "nor a handsomer."

"You mean the young people," said Lady Diana, coming up to him to see if any advantage could be taken of his apparently sentimental mood.

"No," he answered, with enthusiasm, "I mean the two greys. I chose them for Grandacre myself. How well they step together!"

All the same, Lord Orme was very proud and happy in his daughter's marriage; and he did not grudge an item of the sumptuous entertainment given to celebrate the event.

That night, when the festivity was at its height, Lady Diana summoned Lord Orme to her side.

"They are all dancing," she said, "come and talk to me a little; I am tired."

Very lovely in her fatigue Lady Diana looked as she leaned back in her chair; her

shoulders brought into dazzling relief by the dark crimson background; her eyes half-closed, her under lip drooping, and revealing a pearly gleam of teeth.

"You will soon have no daughter left," she added, with a significant glance at Rosa, who was engaged in an animated conversation with a vacuous-looking young nobleman; a youth too inexperienced and simple to know how to defend himself from the spirited assault the vivacious young lady was making on him.

Lord Orme followed the direction of Lady Diana's eyes, and for an instant looked pleased; then his face clouded over.

"No daughter left," he repeated mechanically; the echo of her words smote him with pain. Between him and the moving figures of the dancers rose up a pale face, whose questioning eyes seemed to demand—

"And where then is my child?"

"Of what are you thinking?" Lady Di said, gently.

"I was thinking that should I ever meet in Paradise the two women my life was linked with on earth, her whom I most loved I should have most cause to fear."

"Why?"

"Because, by some strange perversity of my intentions, I injured her who was dear to me, and exalted her whom I ha—I mean for whom I did not so much care."

"Lord Orme," Lady Diana said, with sudden energy, "why should you not marry again?"

"Eh! what?"

"And marry me," she concluded, leaning towards him, and trying, with all the power of her expressive features, to make him feel her beauty.

"You are alone—and I am alone; you are no longer a young man—and I have left

girlhood far behind me. We are both of us easy tempered; of equal rank and—and circumstances" (Lady Di hesitated a little, remembering her milliner's bill); "I have never liked any one so well as yourself since" (here her voice broke) "I—lost my poor—Stuart—but that was a long while ago" (recovering herself), "and I am sure that if he were to look on me now"—here Lady Di gave an upward glance at the brilliant lustres of a chandelier—"he would approve my choice."

"But"—began Lord Orme.

"I know what you would say," she interrupted, "my conduct is unwomanly."

"No, no, Lady Diana, I am only too much flattered—but the honour is so great—I am overwhelmed, and really you are too young and lovely to sacrifice"—he paused. What could he say? and how could he say it? all the ordinary expressions of astonishment would fail to convey his amount of surprise and perplexity.

He was a man averse to innovations. His first impulse was always to reject any proposition which bore the impress of novelty; he hated change; he was unhappy during the late Lady Orme's lifetime, but he got used to his unhappiness, and was sorely aggrieved when death relieved him of his tyrant. Now he had become accustomed to his liberty, and liberty was sweet to him. What was he to say to this proposition, which took away his breath with its magnitude? Lady Diana had played a bold stroke, but she knew the nature of the man with whom she had to deal. He was too chivalrous and delicate minded to judge her harshly if she failed. If she succeeded she should not regret the means she had taken to attain the end.

“If there is but one road to a place, one must take it; and in attacking a man who lives in a continual state of mental see-saw, one's only game is to frighten all the oscillation out of him,” she said to herself.

Nevertheless, she was feminine after all, and a genuine blush suffused her face when she spoke the words that were to decide all.

Lord Orme walked up and down with hasty, nervous steps.

"I am aware that I ought not to hesitate for an instant," he said; "but"—

("It would be odd if you did not," muttered Lady Di.)

"But, I am so unworthy."

"Not so," Lady Diana said, rising and edging towards the conservatory. "Blame me as much as you will, but do not seek to escape—I mean, to evade the position by self-depreciation; remember, Lord Orme, that by so doing you deprive me of the only excuse I have for my conduct. If anything can justify my frankness, it can only be my conviction and appreciation of your worth."

Lord Orme looked doubtfully towards the conservatory.

It was there Grandacre had proposed to Amelia, and perhaps my lord fancied there might be infection lurking in that sweet, heavily perfumed atmosphere.

“ You are too beautiful to throw yourself away, besides”—

“ Am I beautiful ? ” she said, softly ; “ do you really think me beautiful ? ” a quiver of joy seemed to run through her voice, and her lovely grey eyes darkened with emotion. He was too perturbed to appreciate these delicate signs of emotion, so she recovered herself ; then she pleaded earnestly and calmly, as one man might reason with another.

“ I am growing old, Lord Orme, and I dread the thoughts of a lonely old age. There comes a season—it is coming to us both—when pleasure turns to pain ; when the vigorous grasp on life fails ; when infirmities crowd on us in place of the graces of youth ; then we wail over our failures, and yet dread their termination. The dark

shadow comes near us, and we shrink away yearning for companionship which may give us courage to face the enemy of life. We call the young and happy to our aid, but they are blinded with the glory of their own strength and joyousness. They rush by us, unheeding our plaint, and not perceiving its cause. When you and I grow older, Lord Orme, would it not be pleasant for us to clasp each other's hands as the darkness gathers. But I forgot, you have children, your fate is happier than mine. When I die there won't be a single being who will care to listen for my last words, or"—

Here the feminine element reasserted itself, and Lady Diana turned away her head and wept, or at least held up a lace handkerchief to her eyes.

"Upon my word this is most extraordinary; I really don't know what to say, Lady Diana. Pray—pray don't agitate yourself. I am not worth it."

"But your wealth and title are," Lady Di murmured, *sotto voce*; and then she wept more.

"I tell you what it is," Lord Orme said, desperately; "I will"—

"You *will*! then you do not despise me," Lady Di cried, ecstatically.

"Dear Lady," he said, "I am immensely flattered; I was unprepared, of course, but still your proposition has given me unutterable gratification. I am the happiest of men, and I will"—he paused; he looked at her with tenderness. How could he look otherwise at such a beautiful face?

"You will excuse me for a few moments; my guests require my presence in the supper room; believe that I adore your frankness, and have determined that I will"—

"What will you do?" she said, eagerly drawing nearer to him, and laying a hand on his arm.

"*I will think it over.*" And Lord Orme vanished in the crowd.

Have you ever seen the baffled face of a cat, when its intended victim slips from under its extended paw and darts into a sheltering hole in the wall? If so, you may picture Lady Di's expression at this juncture.

Nevertheless, she was not altogether dissatisfied.

"It is half the battle to get him familiarized with the idea," she thought, "Hecate might marry him if she only persisted long enough, far less *me*! I shall be Lady Orme yet."

"I want to speak to you, Lady Di!" The tone was imperative, such a tone as no man uses to a woman (granted that he is in possession of his senses) unless words of love have passed between them.

Lady Di looked up, and hesitated.

"Where?" she said, ignoring the conservatory, which she had been so anxious to enter a few moments previously.

"I know enough of the sex by this time

to be aware that while no one can make opportunities so quickly as a woman, no one can evade them more dexterously when she ceases to desire them," Captain Mowbray said, rather bitterly. "Did I not see you, just now, signifying by look, if not by word, to Lord Orme your wish to rest yourself on the fauteuil in the shadow of yonder ferns? Come."

He offered his arm, and Lady Diana accepted it with something very like a curse between her rose-pink lips. Your coquette is never very far from hating where she has loved, and Lady Di could not forgive the man who inconvenienced her.

Supposing that Lord Orme should return swayed by his mutable inclinations, as waves are swayed by the fickle power of the wind, and she miss grasping the treasure wafted for one brief instant to her feet.

"This comes of teaching one's mule how

to drive," she murmured discontentedly.
"There must be an end to this : he shall have his final *congé* to-night."

By which it will be seen that Lady Di already wearied of this her last toy.

She sat down in the seat to which Thurstan pointed, and he placed himself by her side.

For a while there was silence between them, such silence as is sometimes sweeter than speech ; sometimes more bitter than the harshest words.

Lady Di was resolved to give her companion no assistance. She sat still, so still that a few over-ripe fuchsia-blossoms that dropped on to her shoulders rested there, and when he put out his hand towards her own with an entreating gesture, she did not seem to see the movement, for her little wrist never stirred from the fold of the dress where it reposed. Despite her annoyance at her position, she could not help feeling a soft sense of enjoyment in this

luxurious atmosphere. Wax-like blossoms of stephanotis strewed the sombrous depths of green foliage, crimson buds of cacti made dusky glows down the sharp sides of their stems. Passion-flowers droopéd and trailed and twisted overhead, and tremulous ferns flung mutable fringes of shadow over her rounded arms and flowing draperies. The sharp edge of the sea wind was closely excluded from this warm, luscious recess, where the vivid hues of tropical plants were subdued by the dim light, and rare fragrance made the slumbrous air heavy with sweetness.

On one side the ocean, growing troubled in the night wind, was visible through the serried panes of glass. Ruffled lines of crested foam chased each other from the dim horizon to the grey shining sands. Sometimes the shadow of a sail flitted over the rough brightness of the moon-lit waves until it disappeared in the distance, where the waters seemed to be splashing

the faces of the stars. On the opposite side of the conservatory was the crimson curtain, drawn partially aside to facilitate the entrance from the drawing-room. Through this aperture came the sounds of the quick footfalls of the dancers keeping time with the glad rush of the music.

"Will you valse?" Lady Diana said, suddenly.

"No."

She was conscious of the gloom in his eyes, of the harsh intonation of his voice, but she affected to perceive neither. The time was gone when she cared either to lull his doubts or soothe his anger.

"They tell me," he said presently, in a voice which she felt grated sorely against the harmony of the scene, "that you are going to marry that old man."

"What old man?" she answered, indifferently, toying with the feathers on her fan.

"You know whom I mean. You have given me enough pain of heart: do not hurt

me with small meannesses. What is the use of humbugging?"

"There is no use," Lady Diana said, quietly. "The older I get, the more convinced am I that to be thoroughly comfortable, one should never take the trouble to humbug; it's much easier to be lazy and selfish, and tell the truth."

"It cannot be true" (leaning over her, and grasping her arm) "that you are going to give yourself to Lord Orme for the sake of his money?"

"Did he tell you so?" Lady Di asked, eagerly, with a vague hope that Lord Orme might have been more explicit to his friend than to herself.

"No; it is you who tell me so," Captain Mowbray said, gloomily. "Your own face is an index to the falseness of your heart. You never throw away your wiles. I was watching you just now, Lady Diana. I am only too well acquainted with every variety of lie your mutable features can express;

but for once I must force the truth from you. Do you or do you not still love me?"

So strong is the force of habit, and so rarely did Lady Diana ever give such questions a decided negative, that she answered, involuntarily, "Yes;" then she thought better of it, and added, with an outbreak of genuine candour, "It is of no use my nursing any further delusion about myself, Thurstan. I believe I love people sometimes, and a little time ago I quite thought I was very fond of you; but to tell you the truth"—

She hesitated. A glimpse of the young man's wrathful face, gleaming pale in the dusk, checked her for an instant.

"Go on," he said, savagely; "the truth does not often grace your lips."

"Well, then, I care for no one but myself."

And Lady Diana sank back in her seat with a little sigh of relief. She was rather glad to be found out at last. The assump-

tion of many disguises had become wearisome to her.

He looked at her for a while in silence; then he came near to her, and took her by the hands.

“ You do not love me ? ”

“ No, on my honour, I don’t think I do now,” Lady Di said, calmly.

Have you *ever* loved me ? ” he repeated, with emphasis. “ Are you quite certain ? ”

“ I don’t know. I daresay I did, until you began to love me back again, and then it got so monotonous—really, I forget—I wish you would not ask such unpleasant questions, Thurstan.”

“ Then you have sinned simply for vanity’s sake ? ”

She looked round uneasily.

“ Do not speak so loud,” she muttered.

“ Do you know what I think of you ? ” he said, with increased excitement, and tightening his clasp on her hands. “ I think that if the Magdalene were living,

you would be unworthy to touch the hem of her robe. When the day comes for you to be judged, Lady Diana, I would rather be the vilest wretch that walks the streets than you—you”——

The next word was whispered in her ear, and perhaps was the hardest one that Lady Diana had ever listened to during the whole course of her evil, pampered life. He kissed her as he spoke it, and in his kiss there was more of contempt than even that bitter word conveyed.

In another instant he was gone, and the sobbing waves and glad music became strangely blended with the harsh echo of that parting word.

Lady Diana looked up pensively at the stars, which gleamed dimly through the thick panes of glass.

“I'll never speak the truth again,” she thought; “if I had lied, he would still be thinking me an angel.”

“Do you think I had *better* do it?” Lord

Orme said, looking rather wistfully at Lady Diana, when, after a short interval, he rejoined her in the conservatory.

His disconnected phrase was perfectly understood by the person to whom it was addressed; but a hovering domestic fancied that it referred to coffee, and forthwith offered him that beverage.

Lord Orme took some, mechanically; but put his hand on the cream-jug when, in the agitation of the moment, Lady Diana filled her own cup.

"That is enough," he said, as he tilted back the cream, with a view to its economy. Then he pondered again.

"I am sure it would be for your happiness and mine," Lady Di said, energetically.

"Ah, yes; I daresay it might be," was the doubtful response.

Lady Diana's heart began to fill with anger; but she concealed it under the guise of emotion.

"I am very unhappy," she stammered.
"I have forfeited your respect and"—

Here she sobbed, not knowing well what to say next.

"No—no: don't say that, replied the kind-hearted nobleman, in distress. "Let it be *Yes* (if it will make your happiness); no doubt I shall get used—I mean, no doubt I shall be very happy. Let it be '*Yes!*' then, Lady Diana."

And, with a deep sigh, he gulped down the rest of his coffee.

Lady Diana dejected, and Lady Diana elated, were two very different persons. Never was a lovelier or brighter face than that which she turned on Lord Orme now. She caught her breath with a little quick sob of delight as she leaned on his arm, and murmured,—

"I am so happy."

The game was won. Defeat would have been disgraceful; but victory brought a thousand honours in its train.

Pacified duns, angry rivals, wealth, comfort,—all these blessings would be secured when she was Lady Orme.

“I wonder if Amelia has got the family diamonds,” she thought.

Then she gave Lord Orme’s arm a little squeeze, and said,—

“I shall tell our friends to-night. Come and dance this quadrille, won’t you?”

“Don’t tell them until after the quadrille, then,” pleaded the other.

And then they went into the dancing-room, and Lady Diana did not tell her friends for the present; but went through the figures of the dance with a little song of triumph in her heart, and the words of the song were,—

“I am Lady Orme—Lady Orme!”

Her eyes shone, her lips kept moving into tremulous smiles of delight; her beauty, irradiated by joy, was almost queenly to-night. Her flashing jewels, the sheeny sweep of her robes, the undu-

lating grace of her movements, all that pertained to her, seemed enhanced by the charm of her triumphant loveliness.

Lord Orme looked at her with mild satisfaction. He was glad she was fair, as she meant always to live with him. He “hoped she wouldn’t want to ride; he hated to see women knocking about valuable horses; and he should stipulate with her she wasn’t to make the tea. Women were so wasteful—spilled the tea all over the place, deluged it with water, then said it was weak, and rang for more.”

And then there was one other thing he determined on. He would fetch Azalea home to live with him; the long endured and unsuspected wrong should be atoned for at length. With Lady Diana to watch over and protect her, scandal would be in a great measure averted. His new wife could help him to place the neglected girl in her proper sphere. He would no longer be burthened with the sickly feeling of remorse

which had haunted him since he rejected the duties of a parent, and cast his own flesh and blood away from the shelter of his love.

"Azalea shall come home," was the refrain of his thoughts as he walked restlessly through the great saloons with Lady Diana on his arm.

"Ought I not to tell dear Rosa?" the latter whispered, as they drew near a brilliant group, in which Rosa's sharp eyes and Rosa's shrill voice were prominent.

She felt this precipitation was indequate of her, but, then, she dared not let Lord Orme "sleep it over" without his making his decision public.

"I will have that pleasure myself," Lord Orme said, with a certain grave dignity not unbecoming to him.

He put his hand gently on his daughter's shoulder.

"Rosa," he began, "I have something very agreeable to tell you."

He paused as a servant drew near to them and presented him with a letter.

"If you please, my lord, a person left this here just now, and was particular about its being delivered to you at once."

Lord Orme glanced at the letter. "Immediate" was written outside; and he stepped quickly up to a small table where candles were burning.

"Pray excuse me," he said to those near him; "but it may be from my stud farm. I will only just glance at it."

Rosa and her friends moved away. Lady Diana alone remained near him, furtively watching his face as he tore open the packet.

Then she suffered her glance to wander round the richly appointed rooms, and her little foot beat time with the music as she exulted over the luxuries of her new home.

"Look at Rosa! how much she is enjoying the dancing, and how devoted her partner seems. Unless I am much mistaken, Lord

Orme, you will soon rejoice over the bridal
of another daughter."

She turned laughingly towards him, and was about to put her hand on his arm to attract his attention ; but when she looked and saw his countenance, her heart quivered with a great pang of nervous terror.

" What is it ? " she cried. " Oh, tell me, what is it ? "

Lord Orme did not speak. His face looked shrunk and livid : his eyes were fixed on the paper, which his fingers held with a stiff grasp, like hands that are dead.

The dance music swelled into a phrenzy of jubilee ; the dancers whirled faster and faster. Rosa and her partner circled near them, in a perfect whirlwind of diaphanous skirts. The girl's eyes were shining with happy excitement. As she passed near her father, she gave him a bright look of recognition, not observing the expression of his face.

" What is it ? " Lady Diana reiterated, her

alarm increased by a silence which seemed so full of pain.

"It is God's justice, I suppose," Lord Orme said, slowly, his words coming out, with an effort, from his drawn lips;—"and my punishment."

Then he put the letter into her hands, and turning away as one who cannot bear his face should be seen, because of its sore trouble, he abruptly left the room.

She looked after him blankly, and then her eyes fell on the letter. It ran as follows:—

"MY LORD,

"Your daughter Azalea is dead. She died in my presence a week since, and I saw her buried this morning. The only reproach she ever made against you consisted in her not mentioning your name during her last hours. The instincts of the dying are eminently truthful; they yearn towards those whose love has been proven, and they reject the false heart

with whose simulation of affection they were content during life. This is my only comfort.

"Her last words were for me who loved her; but she did not speak of the man who was once too dear to her, nor of the father who was as nothing to her.

"Her foster-parent, George Moore, told me before he died, that he believed in his heart that you were married to the dead girl's mother. Whether this be true or false matters little now, for even were such the truth, and I forced you to own it, not all the honour of your name and wealth could reanimate my girl into the beauty of life.

"That she should never move again seems to me more wonderful than that she should have ceased to speak; for lately she had grown very silent, but her fingers were always restless, and her eyes continually sought the window, as though she expected some arrival that might bring her happiness; but no one came, excepting the old doctor, and although

I learned to loathe his kind face (for when I said, 'Is she not better?' he always shook his head), yet when he ceased to come, the iron entered into my soul, for I knew that to me all life was dead!

"Now I have only one prayer; it is, 'Let me rest undisturbed.'

"Loneliness is the only boon fate can now afford me; let no one who knew her come to seek her grave. It would hurt me to read in your eyes a sorrow less great than my own; and when I tell you, my lord (you who were so rich in human love that you could afford to thrust this beautiful soul away from your heart), that I have lost the one creature that made life endurable to me, you will understand that my grief is not one to be solaced by the babble of useless sympathy.

"I am, my lord, your obedient servant,

"ROBERT DOUGLAS."

Lady Diana read this letter with a look of strange perturbation in her face. Not

that she felt much affected by its contents, although she could afford to commiserate her dead rival, and wished (since she found that she did not care for Thurstan as much as she had once thought she did) that she had not wiled him away from one to whom his loss had apparently brought death.

The cause of the distress and perplexity on Lady Diana's countenance was to be found in the character of the handwriting before her. In this letter, written under the influence of strong feeling, Douglas had departed from the form of caligraphy which for a long time past he had adopted, and these characters resembled some which Lady Diana remembered to have seen many years ago.

As she held the letter under the lamp, that she might discern the words more clearly, a throb of fear came to her heart, and the fingers holding the paper trembled exceedingly. Doubt did not strengthen into conviction until she turned the letter

over mechanically and caught sight of the seal on the envelope. For a moment or so her eyes stared at it with painful intensity ; then she moved quickly towards an alcove and seated herself on a sofa, for her feet seemed failing her, and she felt a proud horror of letting her suffering even be guessed at by the spectators.

She knew the seal well ; she was only too sure she did. She had a keen memory for trifles, and she remembered how, when, in the first sweet hours of their wedded life, she tried to wile his signet-ring from her husband's finger, he had laughingly repulsed her, saying that "not even Ana should deprive him of his father's last gift."

There are many things pleasant enough to have recalled to one's mind in a chance pang of recollection,—the air of a sweet old tune associated with a vanished hour of jubilee,—the smile of your lover when he turned his head to give you that parting

look,—the crow of your babe when it welcomed home your face,—the last words of your first love-letter;—each of these reminiscences are fraught with an exquisite delight; but to believe for a long number of years that you are eternally free of the companionship of one whom you had feared rather than loved—to be seized by a fearful suspicion that the unloved dead are not, in fact, supine in death's helplessness, but live,—live to judge, to condemn, and perhaps to avenge!

In truth I am not surprised at the excess of Lady Diana's agitation as she sat huddled in the shadow of the alcove. The loud music sounded dull and far away, as the murmur of the melancholy sea. The brilliant chandeliers appeared to gyrate madly in a whirlwind of sharp little flames. Only two things seemed distinct to her in that horrible bewilderment of brain. One was the peculiar form of a certain letter written on the page her hand clenched; the other,

the sound of that hard word which had vexed her a short while since.

She was brave even in this extremity. She nerved herself to answer with apparent gaiety the light remark of one of her admirers who presently approached her. She accepted his escort to her carriage, and she gave him a parting smile of such sweetness, that he involuntarily stopped to look at himself in a mirror on his way back to the ball-room.

Although some knew, and many suspected, that the news of some affliction had come to Lord Orme that night, no one guessed what a terrible anxiety was consuming this fair, gay-mannered woman.

"I must make sure—*make sure*," she iterated, in the solitude of her own chamber. "Another man might inherit and wear that ring; but how should any other possess *his* trick of handwriting?"

She sighed heavily as she dragged herself towards her bed.

"I have a great mind to say my prayers," she thought, ruefully.

Habits enforced in early youth frequently recur, after long disuse, in hours of trouble. Lady Diana had been taught by her good old nurse always to pray fervently when any affliction impended over the household, that it might be averted.

She could not sleep. The pillow might have been bristling with spikes for all the comfort she could find in it. She turned restlessly from side to side, like a wild creature rebelling against the torture of captivity; in repose the dread seemed to grow stronger, the fear bigger. With a groan, she rose from her bed, and paced up and down the room. She caught sight of a dim, ghastly face as she passed by her mirror, and shuddered to think how soon such wearing anxiety would make her old and ugly.

"I *must* ascertain the truth," she mut-

tered. "Suspense is the worst phase of sorrow. To-morrow—or rather to-day, for those wrangling church clocks are all chiming five together—I will go down to Auriel, and see this Robert Douglas."

There was something Roman and heroic in her, after all. She preferred invoking her own fate to awaiting for the creeping progress of Atropos' scissors.

CHAPTER XII.

WAT YOU HOW SHE CHEATED ME?

WHEN Captain Mowbray left Lady Di Merton's presence, he walked down the stairs at Orme House, feeling very much as if some one had dealt him a blow in the face: a blow none the less hard to endure, in that he could not tangibly represent it. If a man kicks your hero, your hero can return it, and (in fiction) will probably all but annihilate his adversary. Your hero may be as gallant as was the late Sir William Peel, and *he* was the nineteenth century Bayard,) he may be pure as Galahad, although that is scarcely an

attractive *rôle* to assume in modern novels; he may have a voice like Giuglini's, mellifluous as nectar; he may rival Fordham on the flat; he may outwit the leviathans of the ring in the game of beggar-my-neighbour, ordinarily played by a knave, a fool, and a dummy—the horse:—he may cut down George Stevens in a steeple-chase, and his favourite hunter may be 5 lbs. better than Knight of the Garter; he may win more pigeon prizes than any other bird butcher;—but what authorial ingenuity can contrive a dignified appearance for the hero who has been twice fooled by a woman?

Holofernes, with his head off, could scarcely have looked more disconcerted than did Thurstan Mowbray when he slunk away from the society of this moral decapitator.

“Idiot! fool that I was ever to dream that woman could have even an interval of veracity! D—n her!”

His heart felt very sore as he looked up at the brilliantly lit windows, and imaged to himself how she, who caused his grievance, was probably breathing more freely in his absence.

“What eyes she must making at Orme now that I’m not there to act as a curb on her,” the young man thought, savagely.

But here he did Lady Di injustice; she never needed to wait for one lover’s absence ere she gave encouragement to another. When she was young she used to affect *tête-à-têtes*. She knew now that life and beauty are too brief to allow of such waste of time.

Thurstan stared at the shining sea, with white face and hot eyes; he was suffering very keenly just now, and had not a single thought in accord with the vast calm of the night.

I do not expect the reader to sympathize with his pain; in novels we only condole with the sorrows of the virtuous; but the

sorrows of the vicious are none the less acute for the absence of commendable motive. Do not children break their babyish hearts in the yearn for forbidden dainties? the moon, for instance, or indigestible green fruit. Are the most passionate desires those that are authorized by right; are the most bitter disappointments only consequent on those baffled aspirations which are in themselves innocent? I can make no excuse for Thurstan Mowbray, excepting that he was to a certain extent blind to the evil of his ways. He had loved this woman, after his fashion, with his whole heart. She had tricked him once, and he had forgiven it, because he so loved her; once again the old spell prevailed, and once again he had been duped. In the madness of his passion, self-engrossed by the tumult of its revival, he never thought how vast was the wrong he was doing that other woman who had given him so great a heart; so great,

indeed, that it surpassed the power of his mental vision to perceive all its magnitude —so long as he was not unkind to her— so long as he was careful not to be detected in his breach of faith, he believed he acted sufficiently well by her. After all it is possible that husbands and wives may have much to be grateful for in each other's reticence, and that each household should erect on its domestic hearth a statue to Harpocrates.

Thurstan had simply *forgotten* his beautiful young wife during the fluctuations of his hopes and doubts concerning the evil-hearted syren who had wiled him away from the thought of Azalea; he felt additional bitterness when he reflected on that useless journey to Paris.

"So expensive, too, and one can't get railway tickets on credit," he growled. To do him justice he would not have grudged his last sovereign (pennies do not enter into the calculations of spendthrifts) to secure

him the woman he longed for, but the most extravagant do not like to feel that they have thrown their money aimlessly at a phantom target.

Thurstan did not go back to barracks at once; there are moments when solitude is the most grateful salve that can be applied to a sore heart, so he turned from the lights of the town and set his face towards the sea.

There was nothing poetic or romantic in his nature; he did not ask of the vastness of ocean or heaven that they should dwarf his pain into insignificance with their superb indifference to his trouble; he did not wander off into vague conjectures respecting those sparkling mysteries of the night which we call stars; he simply withdrew from the "stony-hearted street," where the shadows of men still flitted to and fro over the gas-lit pavement, because he feared to meet any eyes that might recognize his, to hear any voice which

should demand an answer from him. In seasons of exuberant joy and bitter sorrow the old wild instincts of the savage sometimes revive in civilized man, the kinship with earth re-asserts itself, and he seeks the loneliness of mother Nature to babble to her of his joy, or to bow down his face towards her that none but she may witness his agony.

“I’ll go to Azalea,” Captain Mowbray said suddenly. “She will be glad to see me.” It was always “me” with Thurstan now-a-days. A good many kind-hearted people are inordinately selfish simply from want of perception. Had any one said to him,—

“ You are a selfish blackguard as well as a fool; you have not only preferred a baleful shadow to a beautiful substance, but you have done so to the fearful detriment of the latter. You have been absent for many days from a young wife who loves you, you have neglected her in thought for a woman

not fit to touch her innocent feet; you have neglected her in deed, by not taking any means of receiving her communications. She may be sick, suffering, even dead, and you not know it. Are you not ashamed of the cruelty of your selfish neglect?" Could any one have thus reproached him, could any woman have thus placed his conduct in its true colours before him (women excel in reproaches and do not spare forcible epithets when they indulge in them), Thurstan would have been struck with compunction, and would have probably hurried off to Auriel in a fever of penitent tenderness; as it was, no one was present to prove to him that he was not the most ill-used person in the world; no one could warn him of the tragedy which he had caused, of the burden which had so far exceeded his own that life had failed under its weight. Captain Mowbray thought of Azalea, not as one injured, but as one who was to comfort him for his injury. His letters had not been forwarded

to him from London. He remembered this now, and remembered to curse the club-porter for having failed to send them on; not that it was of so much importance after all: he could calculate tolerably well as to what description of missives awaited him; a tender little coo from Azalea, several sulky croaks from irritated creditors, a duty letter from his sister, hoping that he was well, commenting on the weather, and sending him a good deal of italicized love. With a sudden blank he thought,—

“There will be no letter from her,”—
“her” meaning Lady Di.

However he kept to his decision about going to Auriel, if only for a few hours; he thirsted for the solace of Azalea’s presence —a presence which was in itself a caress. His wounded vanity yearned for the balm of her devotion, he looked on her in the light of a superior sort of cigar, something to soothe his irritation and dull his pain.

“Yes, he would go to her.” He imaged

to himself how she would glow at his approach, how she would run to welcome him with eye, lip, and voice! He knew nothing of that fresh raised mound in the Auriel churchyard, he could not guess that the colour had gone out of her cheeks for ever, and that a narrow strip of moonlit earth, slanting between two sullen stunted cypresses, shielded her from further unkindness.

The wind rose and the sea grew more troubled. Thurstan shivered as he drew his cloak closely about him and thought that he was not quite so young as when he kissed Lady Di on that mellow noon when she first showed, what he now inwardly stigmatized as, the "cloven hoof." Then he turned his steps homewards, and as the clouds thickened over the moon's face, he could no longer see his way clearly, but moved through a dark guideless space which was filled with wild hints of storm and shipwreck. He was glad when he had

got away from that dismal shore haunted by cold touches of spray, by the brackish scent of deep-coloured sea flowers, by the ominous moan of the rising wind, and by the sting of the pang which he had brought with him to the water's edge.

“I suppose I'd better turn in for a couple of hours,” he said, discontentedly, as he stood once more in barracks; but he hated the thought of sleep, knowing that the pang of memory, which would seize him when he next awoke, would be worse to bear for that temporary lull of consciousness. Yet the idea of Azalea was a comfort. Indeed, he thought if he had her in his arms he could partially forget Lady Di.

The more he pondered over the wrong the latter had done him, the stronger grew his longing for her who was to palliate the smart.

“I will run down to Auriel to-morrow,” he thought; but the next morning, when he was on the point of starting for the

station, the servant of a brother officer came with a message, asking him to be so good as to step in and see the major before he went.

The major was Major Welter, the "Gentleman Jock" of the regiment, and one of its most popular officers; young (as majors go), handsome, bar a broken nose, honourably gained in a fall over a stiff flight of post and rails, rich, and popular. What more could a man desire to ensure his happiness? Major Welter did not desire more, but to be something, or rather somewhat less, was necessary to his peace of mind; he had an unhappy propensity to grow,—not fat according to the Banting standard, but heavy in a handicap point of view.

On this particular morning anyone uninitiated in racing mysteries would have viewed the gallant major's appearance with concern and alarm, fearing that he was the victim of some prostrating distemper. When Thurstan entered the room nothing

was visible of his friend save the tip of a damp-looking nose. The mother that bore him would scarcely have recognized her son in that heaving mass of yellow flannels which represented or rather misrepresented the manly outline of John Welter. Mowbray exhibited neither surprise nor commiseration. He was accustomed to these desperate attempts at liquefaction of the too solid flesh of thirteen stone men.

"Been wasting, I see. What have you brought it down to?"

A faint voice answered from under the blankets, in a Desdemona like tone of pathos,—

"It's no use, Mowbray. Five pounds off yesterday, four pounds off to-day, but there's still eight pounds too many on me which I *can't* get down. Just ease off one of the blankets, will you?"

Mowbray obeyed his friend's behest, and the voice was heard rather more distinctly.

"I've tried all I know. I've shut my

eyes at mess so that I shouldn't be tempted by the joints, I've resisted my liquor, I've qualified for an anchorite, by Jove! I've walked, looking like an animated turnip, until I nearly dropped, and now after all my exertions, after all my abstinence, I weigh, and find myself eight pounds too heavy—it's enough to break a fellow's heart!"

And something like a tear shone in the eye which peeped out above the shining nose. Scoff him not ye who have never known what it is to strive against the misery of "superincumbent flesh," and to fail in the strife.

"I was going to ride my chestnut horse, Piff Paff," the major continued, dolorously. "I've backed him for a heap of money. You see, he's such a queer-tempered beast I couldn't put an ordinary amateur on him. I wish you'd ride him, Mowbray."

"When is it to come off?"

"To-morrow; it's the Wharneshire Hunt

Steeplechases. The horse will go on to-night; we can go down to-morrow morning, and if we catch an early train back, we'll have such a jolly dinner in town!" and the speaker's eyes glistened once more, this time with pleasurable emotion.

"I'll ride him for you with pleasure," Mowbray said; "but I shall have to leave town in the evening. I'm going down into the country."

Captain Mowbray's heart was still very sore, and as he had not fasted, he did not feel that a dinner would afford him any especial consolation.

After a brief consultation, the friends arranged that they would go together to Wharneshire that night, and that Captain Mowbray's servant should call in town for his master's letters, and follow the latter down to the race meeting on the following morning. Was there in Thurstan's mind a lingering hope that Lady Diana might repent her decision, and dispatch some sign

of grace in pursuit of him? Did he nourish any such hope, it was faint and fine as a spider's thread, and he himself was hardly conscious of its subtle existence.

"That boy young Orme is going to ride a mare of his own, which he has hunted once or twice. I do not fancy his father knows he is out on this occasion. Belton of my regiment is up too, and Flitter rides Antelope." Flitter was a professional, and he, the major added with solemn emphasis, "was dangerous."

CHAPTER XIII.

CONRAD PAYS FORFEIT.

AT an early hour on the following morning six men might have been seen studying the topography of the Wharneshire Hunt Steeplechase course with somewhat of the solemnity of chiefs of an army surveying a proposed field of battle. These were Mowbray and Conrad Orme (riding under the name of Emro to evade paternal scrutiny), Major Welter and Captain Belton, Flitter the "dangerous," and Mr. Knowlton, an experienced amateur performer in the pig-skin. Five of the faces looked anxious. Major Welter's alone was serene; he was

not going to ride, and the fences didn't look nearly so big to him as they did to the others.

"Do you think your little mare is up to this, Orme?" Mowbray asked anxiously of Conrad Orme. "And won't there be the deuce of a row when your governor hears what you're after?"

"If the governor chooses to quarrel with me, I can't help it," young Conrad said, grandly; a man must have his amusements, and I've every confidence in the mare."

"Rather creepy, don't you think?" Captain Belton suggested to Flitter, with a look of sick aversion at a wide double.

"Not a bit of it, sir," the professional said, not understanding the speaker's meaning as to the danger's making his flesh creep; "as nice a flying country as you want to ride over."

His cheery voice was felt as an insult by the others as they gloomily scrutinized a stiff flight of posts and rails.

"Piff Paff, if I remember right, gave me a crumpling over a low gate last year, when I rode him to hounds for you," Mowbray said, with an uneasy twist of his neck, and a vivid recollection of the fall which kept him silly for ten days after.

"Yes," Major Welter answered, gaily; "and I got over so well on my second horse."

Captain Belton looked uncomfortable, and suggested an adjournment to the paddocks, and to brandy and soda.

It was not until an hour or two later, when Captain Mowbray had been lifted on to the queer-tempered chestnut, that his servant made his appearance, holding in his hands his master's letters and papers.

"Clear the way," the rider cried, angrily, as Piff Paff essayed to go out of the paddock human-wise on two legs. "I can't look at them now; or stay" (the "queer-tempered" had altered his tactics, and preferred to stick his forefeet into the ground

with a look of stolid determination in his wicked-looking eyes and ears), “I might as well see the outsides.”

Thurstan hastily scanned the handwriting on the various envelopes. There was none from Lady Di, and in noting the omission, he felt conscious of feeling a little more heavy at heart than he had done two minutes before. There was, however, an envelope marked “*immediate*,” and this he tore open, taking advantage of the chestnut’s temporary quiescence.

Major Welter coming up to give his friend various hints as to the best modes of outwitting, coercing, and cajoling Piff Paff, was struck with consternation at the sight of the rider’s face; all the bloom of colour had died away from it—it was dull and heavy-looking as lead; his head drooped on his breast; his hands were trembling; his eyes glazed. Had the chestnut but known it, he might have shaken his rider from him as though he were a dead leaf.

"Surely he don't funk," the major muttered, in his dismay.

"Here, Mowbray, shall I bring you some brandy?"

"Yes, brandy!" Thurstan echoed, mechanically.

But the brandy did not bring the colour to his cheeks, nor the light to his eyes.

"There are some things brandy can't get at," the major said, reflectively; "funk is one of 'em; but I never should have believed Mowbray could lose his nerve."

Here Piff Paff, tired of a resolution which no one tried to induce him to alter, began to walk quietly forwards, and Mowbray was awoke by the movement to the necessities of his position.

"Don't be afraid, I'm not nervous," he said, in answer to his friend's anxious glance; "only I have just got some bad news, and it has rather upset me, that's all."

"If he makes a mull of it, I shall have

to bolt over seas," Jack Welter thought sadly, and then he turned and looked at the rival mounts for this race.

There was Conrad, the feather of the race, who at ten stone, and in the airiest of breeches and the most impossible of gossamer boots, so fragile as to put a thorn or a rough bush out of the question, was to ride his own little mare Marigold, and we may be sure that with all the lad's faults he will ride boldly if not well. Captain Belton was there adjusting his horse Greyling's double bridle with a somewhat tragic expression of countenance.

"I don't fancy myself a bit," he explains candidly to Flitter. "This violent, lurching brute will never get round the first turn, but will bolt away heaven knows where."

Mr. Knowlton looks at his sweet-tempered Madonna and inwardly passes a vote of confidence in her. She and her rider

are well acquainted, and have mutual trust one in the other.

The glare of the white booths, the gay colours, the discordant sounds, the course itself, dimly indicated in the distance by the double posts with blue flags, the eager faces of the crowd, the dark, shining shadows which seemed like horses passing out of the paddock in line,—for an instant or so all these appeared blurred and confused to Mowbray; he was blind and deaf in the first stun of that grievous surprise.

“She is dead!” he muttered; “she is dead, and I have killed her!”

For Douglas had not spared him the truth in the brief letter in which he told him of Azalea’s fate.

“She is dead, and you have murdered her. I have seen a letter you wrote to that woman. She—your wife—had seen it; it appears that you accidentally lost it at Auriel; Azalea saw it, and she never ceased to see it until she died; the thought of you

troubled her to the last. I am thankful that her pain is over."

The sound of a crazy bell now compelled an interval of natural attitudes on the part of the acrobats, silenced the voice of the itinerant musicians, and that of the gipsy who was promising immense returns in the shape of blue-eyed sweethearts and large families for the small outlay of one sixpence. The last old woman was run nimbly off the course by the assistance of two policemen, when Captain Belton came sailing along on Greyling. He had his hands full, and was doing all he knew to restrain his impetuous brute, who feeling the curb brought to bear, answered by mad plunges and bounds in the air; by dint of hauling his excited head round till it almost brushed his rider's knees, Captain Belton at length reduced Greyling's movements to a rational canter, and the horse subsided into a walk, just as the rider, his arms cramped and numb with pain, was

mentally vowing Greyling as a sacrifice to dogs.

Meanwhile, Conrad and Knowlton have taken their canters past the stand and over the bushed hurdles in front of it, their nags going with fluent ease, Conrad a little excited, and eager to be first over, his bright boyish face and yellow curls making him the especial favourite of the ladies in the stand.

Flitter now catches hold of Antelope; he is a little anxious to know what sort of a performer he has under him. The horse and the rider have never met before to-day; but experience is the schoolmaster of sympathy, and the jockey feels, rather by instinct than anything else, the almost imperceptible protest, lodged by his lean, wiry-looking thoroughbred, against the object before him.

A firm vice-like hold of the horse's head, and a sudden grip from the knees, and Antelope is brought up to the hurdle with

such a determined rush that he gives up all idea of his meditated rebellion and flies his obstacle in such style, as (combined with his rider's close seat and steady hands), confirm him more strongly than ever in his position of first favourite.

Lastly came Thurstan Mowbray—his cheek was flushed now, and his eyes bright with unnatural excitement. He meant “to ride like the devil,” he told himself. He shouldn’t care if he got spilled, or even had a very bad fall; this world was a bothering world after all. At any event he should get free of the burthen of this intolerable self-reproach.

He dared not dwell too long on the horror of that letter, he feared he might lose his head altogether. As it was, Azalea’s white, dead face kept rising before him, and once he even lifted his hand to put it gently away.

“I wish you’d take it away until the race is over,” he murmured half aloud;

and Major Welter thinking his friend alluded to the brandy flask put it out of sight, and perhaps it was well he did so, for Captain Mowbray had already consumed a considerable amount of its contents.

At present, however, his judgment was not one whit impaired by the stimulant he had taken, nor by his mental distress. The force of habit is a strong controlling power. It is said that men in battle sometimes sit their horses with consummate grace and skill even while Death is in their hearts. Mowbray, with a growing madness in his brain, sat and handled the uneasy beast he rode with all his usual ability.

He walked Piff Paff slowly up to the hurdles, and flapping the reins loose upon his neck tried to pat and talk the chestnut into a belief that nobody wanted him to jump.

“What’s your jock about, Welter?” asked a horsey-looking man, clad in the costume

supposed to be identical with a taste for sport—*i.e.*, tight trousers and stunted coat.

“Can’t tell, can’t tell,” was the hurried reply. “Never interfere with another man’s riding, especially when he knows as much as Mowbray does.”

Meanwhile, Mowbray having approached as near to the hurdles as he dared, veered his horse round, and picking up his reins, quickly darted off in an opposite direction for a brushing spin. The spectators looked blank at being baulked of the anticipated jump.

He of the tight trousers, who had watched the proceeding with undisguised scorn, shouted in derision—

“Five to one against Piff Paff.”

“Put it down to me, sir,” coolly rejoined Major Welter.

“To a £100, if you like,” said the other.

“It’s a bet,” replied the major; adding to a keen-eyed bookmaker standing near him—

"I only got four to one from you."

"No, sir, and I wouldn't give you three to one now."

The horses now walked quietly down to the post, where Lord Pastern, who, as the "correct card" affirmed, was acting as starter, had already arrived.

"Come back behind the post!" shouted my lord, who had taken some lessons in the art of starting; "I won't start you till you're all behind the post. Now, Captain Mowbray, why are you hanging back? Come up, come up."

Piff Paff makes a few steps in a forward direction, and Conrad, taking this a hint to be off, digs his spurs into Marigold, and jumps away; the others, infected by his example, also spring forward till they have gone about two hundred yards, when Flitter who feels rather than sees there is something wrong, pulls up and returns. Conrad Orme and Knowlton soon follow his example, and so would Captain Belton if Grey-

ling permitted it, but the latter bolts as far as the stand, where he stops short, like one of those wilful toy-mice, which when once wound up run their own way or none at all:

“Get inside him, Captain.”

“Really, sir, how much start do you want?”

Amidst such like derision, Captain Belton winds his solitary way back to the starting-post.

“What, Flitter, you here?” cries Lord Pastern, as the jockies rejoin him. “Why, what on earth makes *you* poke your nose in here, as the doves in the dovecot said to the eagle. ‘I suppose you’ve got a certainty.’ What’s your nag?”

“He’s a four-year-old, my lord,” whispers Flitter, mysteriously. “He’s by Thunderbolt; they tried him to be a fairish horse last year, but he turned cur, so they put him to cross-country work. He’s as clever a fencer as ever wore a bridle, but I’m sadly afraid he’ll cut it to-day if there’s anything

good enough to stretch his neck. Still his owner has backed him for a heap of money."

"Well, he has to carry ten pound extra for professional assistance, Flitter, but I fancy you can give away that little lump."

"Not to Captain Mowbray, my lord. I don't know who can give him weight over a country ; he knows as much as most of us."

By this time the horses were nearly all in a heap, and Lord Pastern dropped his flag with a hearty "go!" The five bounded away in close order, and kept pretty well together until the hurdles at the stand, a quarter of a mile from the starting-post, were nearly reached, when Captain Belton shot to the front, and with out-stretched neck and star-gazing head his hasty brute, never rising, smashed through the hurdle in front of him ; almost instantaneously, Conrad, Flitter, and Knowlton topped the gorse, while Mowbray quietly slipped through the passage cleared by Greyling.

Passing the stand and betting-ring, the

riders catch occasional shouts of five to four against Antelope, two to one against Piff Paff, and poor Captain Belton, if he were still within ear-shot, might hear the mocking cries of fifty to one against Greyling; the latter never slackens as he draws near the fence in front of him, but taking off out of distance crashes down to the bottom of the ditch and there reposes. His jockey has just time to arise and swear that he is a dead man, when Conrad, by this time two lengths ahead of the running horses, hurries down to the obstacle; Mowbray and Knowlton take the jump shoulder to shoulder, while Flitter easing his nag, shaves the flag in cutting off the corner. A beautiful piece of sound turf succeeds, and the four sail away as if the field had no boundary, Flitter holding Antelope hard by the head, as much as to say,—

“Now, this is the finest fun in the world, and if you don’t take care I won’t let you have the spree of going at all.”

Thereby deceiving the wily nag and infusing courage into his cowardly heart.

The exit is at last arrived at and a trumpery little thing it looks—so insignificant, that Conrad's mare blunders on to her head and throws him on to her neck, so that he has to work back by degrees and fish uncomfortably for a lost stirrup, which seems like a stirrup possessed, and flies up and down, banging his leg thinly encased in his riding-boot. Seeing the consequence of Marigold's inattention to the ditch, Knowlton pulls Madonna round opposite to a small thorn bush, which he thinks will make her rise.

His ruse succeeds. Meanwhile Piff Paff, who is in an unwontedly gracious mood, thanks to the soothing influence of Mowbray's delicate yet firm handling, simply strides away, and seems not to see the gap he flies over, while Flitter, with a "Come up, horse," also follows in safety.

They now cross a deeply-ploughed fallow field, which necessitates some holding together, albeit the land is so dry that the horses move in a cloud of dust ; and Flitter, who is lying back, blinks his eyes uncomfortably at the showers of clods and small stones thrown up by his predecessors. Antelope also shows his disgust by shaking his head from side to side. Catching sight of a cross-furrow, Knowlton drops Madonna into it, and feeling the relief of coming on to firm going, sends her along at a rattling pace, immediately followed by Mowbray. The mishap at the gap had dispossessed Conrad of the lead ; but he now works his way to the front, and pounds along, regardless of the furrow, thinking only how to regain the foremost place, which object he achieves, not without trying poor Marigold severely. The fallow runs out into a green lane, patched by an encampment ; and the tawny children, who resemble the received notion of imps, shout with glee as

Marigold, springing to the summit of the opposite bank, disappears in the meadow beyond.

Madonna, Piff Paff, and Antelope follow, and the pace improves with the horses' appreciation of the elastic sod.

"Hang it," ejaculates Conrad, "what a deuce of a wind there is." The lad thinks he is in a gale, from the pace at which he is tearing along; but, in fact, there is not a breath stirring. "I must keep my mouth shut," he thinks, "for my tongue feels like leather. What wouldn't I give for a wine-glass of water? Hold up, old woman," he cries to Marigold, who is getting careless in her fatigue, and, putting her foot into a water furrow, threatens to somersault.

The game little mare cheers up at the sound of his voice, and changing her leg, gathers herself together for the post and rails, which now show new, hard, and forbidding at the bottom of the pasture.

"Well, there's no breaking *them*," thinks

Flitter; but he yet resolves that the other three shall have the first chance.

Mowbray clenches his teeth as he mutters, "I wonder if"— and sits back on the chestnut, prepared to rouse him with the spurs at the very last moment.

"Yoi, over," screams Knowlton to Conrad, whose answering cheer rings in the air as he lands well in the next field, succeeded by Madonna, both horses performing faultlessly. Mowbray draws Piff Paff nearly into a trot until close up, when he drives the sluggard at the timber vigorously, his tactics serving him so well, that he gets over with a bang which reminds the horse that oak rails carry *noli me tangere* plainly on their faces.

"Lucky I didn't lark over those hurdles at the stand," thinks Mowbray. "He'd have been sure to sweep them away, and to have tried the same game here."

Flitter, not daring to check his uncertain Antelope too much, rises simultaneously

with Mowbray and gets over with the same luck. The brook is swung over without a mistake, greatly to the disappointment of the crowd. Steeplechase brooks are not as hunting brooks, and afford no fair trial of a hunter's water-jumping abilities. In a steeplechase brook the take off and the landing are ensured sound, and a low flight of gorsed hurdles conceal the sheen of the water from the horse until it is too late for him to retreat. A few more fences, chiefly bank and ditch, and the competitors near the stand once more. Flitter glances his eye along the cords to catch the eye of Antelope's trainer, while Mowbray listens mechanically to the changes in the betting. The twenty to one against Marigold conveys no warning to the excited Conrad, who cannot resist urging his mare to "leave those duffers standing, and win in a walk." Poor lad, poor horse. She does try her best; but though her rider has sense enough to save her a little by select-

ing the sound furrow in the fallow field, and although he does continue to lead first out of the lane, this time lined with the noisy expectant children, the jaded mare reels over the bank, and is passed immediately by the other horses. Ah! Mari-gold passed by those you led so gallantly, who shall tell the pain you feel?

Mowbray now takes up the running; he conjectures that to tire faint-hearted Antelope will be his most workmanlike plan. He sees Madonna has done her best, and that henceforth the race lies between Piff Paff and the favourite. Calculating with reason that the previous bruises over the timber have taught his horse a lesson, he faces the posts and rails confidently, and gets over cleverly, succeeded by Antelope, who raps all fours, and Madonna, who follows suit. Conrad comes labouring on, the mare struggling painfully to keep her companions in sight.

"I may yet do it," the lad thinks; "they

may all come to grief afterwards, and if I can but get over *this*, I may win even now. Forrad, forrad," he cries; "once more, old girl, it's the last time!"

And hand and heel go desperately to work. Marigold looks helplessly from side to side as though seeking an alternative, and then game to the last, although she feels her strength is utterly spent, she gives a pitiful spring, catches both fore legs on the top rail, and crashes headlong down on the grass beyond. Presently the exhausted mare struggles up again, but the rider does not move. The ladies in the stand see through their *lorgnettes* that a huddled heap of pink and white hoops is lying like a crumpled rag on the green meadow, but fortunately for them they cannot distinguish the face of the pretty boy jockey; the sun shines down fiercely on him, but his upturned eyes do not shrink; awe-stricken men whisper questions to him, but he preserves an ominous silence; his cheek is

stained by something redder than a blush, and his features have lost their shape under the imprint of his horse's feet.

But just now and he had flashed through sun and shadow a gracious living presence; now he lay stiff and ungainly with the ugliness of death creeping on him. A few moments since and he had passed the grand stand a gay-hearted lad, his cheeks glowed by the wind, his bright short curls glistening in the sun, and with no more solemn thought in his mind than that "If he won, perhaps the governor would not so much mind his having ridden."

Now he was something which could not even think; something with a face which was a fearful parody on humanity; something which every instant was going farther away from the world without being able to breathe it a farewell.

"Breathing still, but senseless, breathing stertorously," says the Doctor, who is one of those quickly collected round the fallen

youth; some half-dozen men take off their coats with eager kindness, and stretching them over the hard bars of a neighbouring gate, carry the body to a farmhouse, where the doctor and a few of the farmer's friends keep watch over the unfortunate young gentleman, living still, but too true a prophet when he shouted to Marigold, "For the last time!"

Unconscious of Conrad's fate, the other three pursue their way; Thurstan increasing his lead, Flitter waiting with the bravest patience, for he knows he dare not press Antelope, and Knowlton gradually tailing off, the spy-glasses at the stand can now discern the state of the race, and the most practised eyes begin to discredit Antelope.

"The favourite's beat," roar the bookmakers; "Piff Paff *walks* in," they add.

But Mowbray is not yet over the brook, and meanly as he thinks of it he would be more cautious and less confident if he saw a staring white greyhound, which, puzzled

at the numbers of people, and the open space left for the steeplechasers, comes bounding along and arrives on the opposite bank just as Piff Paff is making his spring. It is too late to make any effort to avert the catastrophe, and in an instant dog, horse, and rider are rolling in the mud. Thurstan holds on to the reins, and taking them over Piff Paff's ears, strips off the bridle, but rising immediately throws his arms round the horse's neck, while a by-stander assists him in readjusting the bit.

In the interval Flitter gets over the water, followed by Madonna, and dreading Mowbray's re-appearance, makes play at the best pace his tiring horse can raise, having too a conviction that even the slow but honest Madonna may, if she can only get alongside of him, snatch the victory in the last few strides.

Layers look black, and backers rejoice.

"The favourite wins easy," shrieks the crowd, and in that moment of excitement,

even women forgot to wonder if that dear little boy, carried away on the litter, was much injured.

“Is the other fellow coming on?” shouts Flitter to a countryman, staring with all his might at the closing issue of the race. But Antelope has swept yards away, before the meaning of the query reaches the stupefied yokel.

The other fellow *is* coming on, hand over hand, knowing his horse will try, and that Antelope will show the white feather if Piff Paff can but collar him. Mowbray does all he knows, and clearing the last fence is soon within fifty yards of the leader; catching and passing the beaten Madonna, he creeps up inch by inch; at the distance he is within six lengths, and resolves to wait to the last. They are now close to home. Antelope gives an uneasy whisk of his tail, a symptom of defeat not lost on Mowbray, who calls on his horse with all the power he is capable of. Flitter

finds Antelope sinking, and almost against his better judgment, picks up his whip; he finds no response from his exhausted nag. Checking at once on the exhibition of punishment Antelope lets up Piff Paff, whose final rush lands him at the post, a clever winner by half a length.

" You have ridden magnificently, my boy," Major Welter said, shaking his jock's hand energetically, " and by Jove! it's the making of me, Mowbray."

Later he added,—“Don't go down into the country, Mowbray; stay and make a night of it in town with me.”

“ No,” Thurstan said, with an odd look on his haggard face. “ I shan't go down into the country, I'm going abroad, Welter. Between you and me, there was a dead woman holding her face close to mine during all that race, and I want to get away from her. I shall go home to my people.”

Late that night Lord Orme bent over his dying boy, yearning for one look, one

word of recognition, but "For the last time, for the last time," was all that Conrad said; and these piteous echoes of his fatal encouragement to poor Marigold were the only coherent words that passed his lips.

When the sun next dawned the lad was at peace, and Lord Orme, bitterly stricken by the unexpected anguish of this last misfortune, kissed the poor bruised lips with his face streaming with tears, and asked himself if this were retribution !

CHAPTER XIV.

ALL IS SAID.

IT was evening at Auriel; a sad-hued evening, full of damp vapours and wan colours; only in the west was the dull, sodden earth glorified, and there every leaf that quivered in the glow of the rosy light appeared a tiny blaze of gold; elsewhere all was desolate-looking; the bare boughs were soaked black by rain, the tawny foliage lay thick over the rose-beds, or made bronze-coloured circles round the dead-looking shrubs.

It was very dreary, Lady Diana thought, as she walked up the avenue on her way

to the house. When she drew nearer to the huge red building with its long range of windows glittering in those last fierce beams of the winter sun, she paused with a sudden terror lest eyes by her unseen might be watching her approach from behind those uncanny-looking squares.

Then she reasoned herself into composure, Who even of her intimates would recognize her thus, muffled up in dark clothes—a thick veil obscuring her face, a black velvet net concealing the brightness of her hair; even her gloves were black, and her pretty feet were disfigured by clumsy-looking shoes.

She walked on towards the door, but her heart beat so fast as she stood on the threshold that she felt suffocated, and it was some minutes before she nerved herself to give a tap, so feeble that a quick-eared mouse would scarcely have been startled by it, far less the deaf old woman who sat crooning over the kitchen hearth. Finding

her appeal futile, and dreading, she scarce knew why, to rouse the echoes in that vast house, Lady Diana peered in at the only window through which she saw a gleam of firelight, and looked intently at the scene before her.

Only one person was visible, and that was old Sally, who crouched over the fire with her hands crossed on her lap; she was half asleep, and her lips were murmuring some little lullaby which had stilled her babe's cry many weary years ago.

"There can be no one else in the house," the watcher thought; "she would not be so still and inactive if she were not alone."

Emboldened by this idea, Lady Diana lifted the latch of the side door, and finding it yielded to her touch, she walked in, and directed by the firelight, found her way to the kitchen.

"Who's that?" the old woman said, suddenly waking up and looking at her visitor with an air of suspicion.

"I hope I havn't startled you," Lady Diana said, kindly. Then she explained that she had been sent to Auriel by some friends of the girl who had lately died. "They wish me to make some little compensation to you for all your trouble," she added, judiciously producing some gold; and old Sally's confidence was won at once.

"So you're a friend of the poor thing that's gone; well now I've often thought it strange no one come to see the last of her. Ah! how she did suffer, to be sure," the crone said, in a tone of melancholy satisfaction. "And she was carried out, ma'am, by that very door you just come in at."

Lady Diana shivered, and looked round uncomfortably.

"Don't talk about it," she said, hastily. "I hate to hear of death."

"Well, it ain't much good shutting your eyes to him when you're sure to see him

some day," Sally answered, composedly. "For my part, I'm ready for him. P'raps, if you'd spent fifty years in working to keep hunger from your inside and rheumatics from your limbs, you'd be tired out as I am. Poor Miss Azalea, she used to whirl about the house gay as a kitten, and sing something about life's being beautiful; but, bless you! that's all according to one's weekly wages and state of health. My life's been ugly enough."

"Did anyone else but yourself take care of that poor girl?" Lady Diana asked, abruptly. "I must make amends to everybody, you know."

"There was only the old doctor. Maybe he won't be sorry to have a present, for all his new carriage; and there's Mr. Douglas, but"—

"But what?" the other broke in, with impatience.

"I was thinking, dear," the old woman answered, slowly, "that no one can comfort

him, since not the Great Power of all has done it; he sits there—upstairs where she died—and he sleeps there at night, and sometimes, when I pass the door, I think I hear him calling her name; but softly, as if he feared to wake somebody."

"Is he there now?"

"I count he is."

"Could I look at him? Could I see him without his seeing me? I should like to carry back word how he looked; they would be sorry if he were ill; but I should be afraid he might be angry if he saw me," stammered Lady Diana.

"I don't think he'd take notice," Sally suggested, "if you was to go to the door (it mostly stands open) and look at him."

But her companion turned a shade paler under her veil, and shook her head.

"I dare not risk it," she murmured.

She had come to seek out this man that she might face the truth; but if her suspicions were correct, she would have met

the awful eyes of the arisen dead sooner than his glance.

"He could never forgive, for he can never forget what my fault led him to," she thought. "And so my sin (a venial one after all) is magnified by his consequent crime; what a fool he was to come back that night! But what a fool I am—it may not be he after all. I declare, if it is not, I'll put up a memorial window to him in his parish church!"

"If we go to the top of them," Sally said, indicating the last flight of stairs, "you can stand behind me, and I warrant he won't notice us."

Lady Diana walked up to a dingy fragment of mirror which hung on the wall, and took heart when she observed how complete her disguise was, while at the same time, with a pang of vexed vanity, she noted what an ungainly appearance she made.

"If he *did* recognize me by any chance,"

she meditated, “I should pull down my back hair accidentally, and toss aside this ugly bonnet.”

When they reached the door of Azalea’s room she hung back with a desperate dread creeping over her heart.

She experienced that sudden sense of failure—failure of nerve, purpose, and physical power—which sometimes afflicts us when we are brought face to face with the peril which at a far distance we have wooed boldly.

Then her heart strengthened with resolution; such resolve as sustains the wretch who welcomes the final agony which puts an end to unavailing torture.

With a long-drawn sigh, and a face contracted with the pain of that moment of sharp anxiety, Lady Diana advanced to the threshold of the room indicated by the old woman, and leaning against the door-post, saw into the interior of the chamber, and saw also in the recess of

a window the bowed form of the man she sought.

The wan rays of the fading sun fell on his head and face, but not all the glory of full day could have evoked any responsive brightness from the deep gloom of those desolate eyes. He was looking, not at the rosy drift of clouds, nor at the flights of birds that blackened the red face of the sun. There was, in his glance, a certain sad wistfulness—the pathetic doubt of one who seeks an answer out of silence, who implores hope from darkness; but there was no interest or sympathy expressed in external objects. His countenance was set in the dull immobility of despair—despair such as no human being might remove or console. Lady Diana looked intently at the grey silken masses of hair, at the deep lines under the eyes, at the ashen cheeks and withered hands, crossed listlessly one on another, and breathed more freely. The man she re-

membered, the man whom she had feared to recognize to-day, had worn a very different aspect. Stuart Merton's hair was of a sunny brown, his forehead white, and his full lips red; his cheeks had always been pallid, but when they last touched hers in his parting embrace, they were smooth as ivory, and unscarred by a single wrinkle; he had been tall and broad-shouldered, carrying his head with a certain proud grace, not unbecoming to one whose heart was rich with happiness. This aged and withered man, sitting so strangely quiet in the gathering dusk, bore no resemblance to him whom the sea had sucked down into its depths eighteen years ago.

Some books were lying partially open on the table, and written papers, on which the ink was dry, were spread before him.

The wan streaks of sunset that were narrowing towards the west presently streamed over a vase filled with dead flowers, which stood near him, and over

a piece of blue ribbon, which, trailing close to the glass goblet, cast a dim reflection of its hue on to the slender transparent stem of the cup.

Glancing mechanically at the varying colour of the glass, Douglas's eyes presently fell on the ribbon, and in an instant the whole expression of his face changed; the lips quivered, the eyes shone out under a sudden blurr of tears, like stars dimmed by mist. He took the ribbon in his hands gently, as if it were a living thing which would shrink from a rough touch. As he caressed this with tender fingers, babbling some inarticulate murmur of love, every hard line relaxed and all the tense composure of despair gave way. Something of youth's fire and youth's mobility returned to his face in the sudden storm of passion which swept over it. As the dying light shone on his eyes, all afire with the pain of memory, on his lips, tremulous in their struggle to keep grief restrained, his

changed expression was revealed to the watcher at the door. She involuntarily shrank back a few steps, and, as she put her hand to her heart, she could scarcely repress a groan, as, with a great throb of terror, she admitted the suspicion that this man's countenance was not after all unfamiliar to her.

"I cannot tell, I cannot be sure," she moaned to herself; "how am I to decide it without risk of detection?"

She stretched out her throat, so as to get a fuller view of the occupant of the room without obtruding herself on his notice. She did not again stand in the doorway, but peered round with the lithe grace and attitude of a bird watching an inimical approach; then, with a sudden access of resolution, with a desperate desire to terminate the great pain of doubt, she crouched yet farther out of sight, and called, in a tone strangely hoarse and troubled,—

"Stuart—Stuart Merton!"

She was conscious of his startled gesture; of a pale face looking in the direction of the door; and then, as his tall figure uprose and moved towards her through the gloom of that lonely chamber, she put out her hands with the desire to clutch at those of the old woman who had accompanied her; praying, in a choked whisper, "Take me away; keep me from his sight," but the old woman was gone. She had wearied of standing there in the dark, cold atmosphere, when her little fire downstairs was blazing a welcome for her, and so she stole away while Lady Diana lingered; and the latter felt voice and hands alike become powerless, as with a sick sensation about her heart, and a dull film closing over her eyes, she lost all consciousness, and dropped down in a heap at her husband's feet.

When Lady Diana awoke to the pain of returning sense she felt like one who moves in the dull atmosphere of a dream, a dream

encumbered by the presence of a hideous terror.

What was this dark chamber, illumined only by the fitful blazes of a wood fire ? and who was he who sat opposite to her, looking intently at the flaring light ?

It was not until she saw the sheen of a blue ribbon, which dangled from his neck, that she thoroughly realized the full trouble of her waking state. This was Stuart, then ; the Stuart whom for so many years she had believed to be physically naught ; this was the body which was thought to have resolved into dust, and from his deep-set eyes gleamed indications of the soul which she had imagined to be existent in the realms of unknown beatitude.

She dared not give herself time to reflect, fearing lest her tongue might again freeze with fear, and feminine weakness interfere with what she felt it to be best to do. She was agitated and unnerved by the mental struggle of the last two days. She was in

part afraid, and in part remorseful. Imagination with her sometimes supplied the place of what in a nobler woman would be called a heart; and a strange pang of repentance pierced her; a glow of shame made her cheek hot as she remembered what her life had been since she parted from this man, who sat there motionless in the twilight; the very sight of him, was in itself a verdict of condemnation.

Douglas was wearing the same absent look in his eyes as when she first saw him in the light of the dreary winter sun. He did not notice her return to consciousness, of which, indeed, she gave no outward sign, excepting in the irrepressible quiver of her lids, and a slight tremulous movement of her pale lips. For awhile she looked at him stealthily, not daring to break the grim silence.

Then, with a quick movement of her hand, she disengaged the masses of fair hair from their disfiguring net, freed her-

self of the heavy shawl which concealed her figure, and rising up before him, stood for an instant as if irresolute, and then sank down, clinging to his knees, an embodiment of Correggio's Magdalen—a Magdalen in grace of form, in softness of dishevelled tresses—tresses which made a glory of soft light over Douglas's black garb and folded hands; a Magdalen in penitence of face and in her shamed attitude; a Magdalen who believed herself to be suffering the pangs of remorse, but who was in reality only writhing under the wound of detection—one, in fact, who would sin again as soon as she had secured herself against the mischances of discovery.

Still clasping his knee, she cried out,
“Forgive! forgive!”

She did not venture to lift up her face to his; she did not dare to counterfeit joy in meeting his eyes; she felt that such an assumption would be impossible to her, and

would seem incredible to him; she could only wail out all her terror and remorse in a passionate entreaty for pardon.

“Oh, forgive me!” she cried. “Oh, Stuart, speak just one word to say that I need not fear a curse in your eyes.”

A flush of colour had come back to her cheeks, and her hair gleamed like gold in the light of the fire. Her sleeves had fallen back from her outstretched arms, revealing their fair roundness. As she wound them tighter about his knees, he was reminded of the strange sinuous beauty of Lamia.

“Won’t you *know* me?” she said, at last, in a subdued, caressing tone. “Have you not one word to give to Ana?”

He removed her quietly; not as if she was an object of aversion, but simply as something which inconvenienced him.

“Yes, I know you very well,” he said, quietly; “but what then?”

Something in his tone exasperated her.

"Is that all you will say to me?" she answered, with somewhat of reproach in her tone.

A gleam of anger lit up his deep grey eyes. "I will say, if you wish it, that you are the devil who led me to do a murder. You have made memory a hell to me. Do you remember that man who kissed you in the fond conviction that I was far distant and unconscious of my shame? Do you ever recall his living face as you last saw it, flushed with your parting embrace, and did you see him afterwards?"

She shivered, and bent her head lower. "No," she whispered. "I never saw him again. I knew he was there, close by; but I would not go to look at him."

"But does he never look at you?" Douglas said, with his face brightening with nervous excitement. "Do you not see those dim set eyes, those contracted nostrils that never dilate with breath, but

which grow every day more shrivelled and pinched? Don't you see how all the proud blood had gone away from his wax-like face—all the brightness from his lank, dull hair? Does he never reproach you in your dreams, for not having given him "more time?"—two hot, angry minutes sent his soul to God. I have thought sometimes, Ana, that those two minutes would be repaid to me by an eternity of hell; but God's mercy is the grand altar, the asylum for those who fly from the ban of their own consciences, and it is my hope that He has let me work out some of my penance here, so that I may yet meet her hereafter."

His voice died away in a murmur of prayer. He seemed to be appealing for the Divine consolation of which he had just spoken, and as he communed with Invisible Glory, his withered face became transfigured with a beauty surpassing that of youth.

The woman at his feet felt inexpressibly awed and humbled. Was this the husband who had gone mad for jealousy of her? who had wrecked his whole life because of her sin? Was his great love, and his great wrath for love's sake, all merged into a religious frenzy, or had much sorrow unsettled his fine intellect, making him a prey to all the troubled fancies and weird terrors of an infirm imagination?

"Is it you, Stuart?" she moaned, as she still crouched at his feet. "Are you the Stuart I knew—the Stuart who loved me?"

He looked at her with sudden anger in his face.

"Why do you come to torment me?" he said, impatiently. "Have you not worked me trouble enough? Cannot you let me be at rest? How can I obtain peace when you intrude on me all the cruel memories of the past? I look at you, and I see that dead man's eyes shining

in the wicked light of yours. I see your tricks of gesture, your caressing hands ; and I am reminded of the lie which blasted my prime of life. I tried to put it away from me, all the old sickening despair ; the keen, deep wound of that blighted time. I succeeded so far as you were concerned ; as years went on, and your worthlessness became more evident to me, as the glamour of love died away in my heart, and my eyes saw with the relentless clearness of truth, I loathed you for all the pain you had caused me. I shrank from the thought of you as a prisoner shrinks at the sight of the rack which has tortured his every limb. Passion was wept away in tears ; the memory of you was more bitter than gall, and I prayed that your image might never cross my thoughts even in the unreality of dreams."

" Am I so horrible to you, then ? " she faltered, looking up at him with deprecating eyes. " Can you not grant me one

forgiving thought? I was guiltless of actual sin, Stuart, I swear it; I——”

“ Bah!” he interrupted, impatiently; “ what matters it? You were guilty enough to ruin me, and to murder that other. I have no sympathy for those women who desecrate their souls with the assumption of vices of which they are practically free. You feign love in your speech, polluting your lips the while with affirming kisses; you, for mere lust of vanity, draw on men towards a hell of temptation which ends in their damnation; your counterfeit love arouses in them all the hot tempest of disordered passions; you inflict real pain, while your assumed emotion is nothing but a pleasant diversion for your idle hours. Such women as you, Ana, are infinitely more contemptible than the poor wretches who grovel in actual sin, to escape the crave of famine and scorch of thirst, or those animal souls, mere slaves of the flesh, that err for the

body's pleasure, and who are at least sincere in the ignoble indulgence of their brutish vices."

" You are too hard; at least you should hear me," Lady Diana said, in a low, broken voice.

" I do not care to hear you; I *know* you," the other answered, briefly. Then he looked down on her, and saw by the wavering light of a flame which played on her flushed cheek, and the golden hairs which overswept it, that she was weeping.

" I daresay you think I have spoken too plainly," he said, in a gentler tone. " I have no wish to reproach you with my injuries. I have forgiven them. I had, in truth, forgotten you until you thrust yourself on me to-night—an evil memory of the past; but when I hear you, and such as you, boast yourself *guiltless*, I cannot forbear the truth. I cannot think God will hold you innocent. And I would recommend you to spend such time as He

allows you here, in endeavouring to secure a hope for the future."

She crept nearer to him, and once more entwined her arms in his in the movement. All the plenteous warmth of her tresses swept like a soft veil over his hands and knees. Then, finding that he did not repulse her, she arose for an instant, and then dropped down on his breast, softly and tenderly, as a bird sinks its bosom over the speckled darlings of its nest.

"Kiss me once before I go," she whispered, "that I may know that you forgive all."

Who can count the various phases of a coquette's nature?

She had sought him in fear and trembling, dreading lest he might burthen her present with the old bitter claims of the past. She had encountered this man with the despair of him who turned to confront the awful shadow which dogged his steps; preferring definite misery to that haunting

dread. She had thought of him with nervous loathing, and now, lo! she lay with her heart beating on his, her eyes, lips, and arms serving as so many allurements to woo back in his heart some of the old fire of his dead love.

She had been almost stunned by his indifference. It was so unexpected and so galling to her pride. She had expected reproaches and denunciation ; she had not calculated on the contempt of unconcern. It vexed her exceedingly that he should be thus careless of her. Every instinct of her nature rebelled at his dispassion ; her pampered vanity was mortified, and intuitively she sought to retrieve the mortification by the aid of her personal charms.

“ Oh ! ” she murmured, as she tightened the coil of her fair arms round his throat ; “ do you forget that you once loved me, that for many happy nights my eyes closed in slumber on your breast ? Will you not forgive for the sake of those memories ?

Stuart, my husband, you are so dear to me still!" Her voice died away in a sigh.

The fire burnt in a level red line in the grate; the wind outside sobbed and plained, like an echo of her grief; the darkness was thick in the room, save where the embers glowed, and her hair made light over his shoulders.

He bent his head down near to her face, his eyes lit with sudden fire; his lips trembled, his hands involuntarily taking such a fierce grip of her arms that she well-nigh wept afresh with pain and terror.

"Oh!" he groaned, "you are a devil, woman!—a devil sent from hell to wake a tempest in my soul. You would fain be omnipotent in your own low degree. You would arouse the gloom of the thunder, the fury of the whirlwind, and the blasting streak of flame, and then, with a light word, bid all be at rest, since you tire of the trouble you have made. When you grow weary, and perchance afraid, of the

horror of your work, you cry in vain for heavenly peace, for the stillness of summer and the brightness of sunshine. You fling the firebrand for the brief pleasure of seeing it blaze, and take no heed who weeps over the blackened ashes. Do not tempt me to feel the strife of earthly passion once more, lest all my penance be wasted. Take your beauty from my sight, lest I curse it in the name of an utterly lost soul. Go, go!"

He unclasped her lingering arms from around his neck, but she still cowered on his breast, weeping piteously and entreating for one look of kindness—one kiss of forgiveness.

"Give me your pardon," she cried, "or I shall die with the sting of your wrath in my heart. You know that I *did* love you, Stuart!"

She sought to twine her hands in his as she spoke; but accidentally she stirred the blue ribbon which shimmered on the deep

black of his mourning clothes. He recoiled from her, and pushed her hands away.

“I know that you *lie!*” he cried, fiercely. “Woman, you would profane death with dishonour. I am as one dead;—I died with one whom I loved more dearly than ever I did you, and now my corpse shall not be ashamed. For you I damned my soul; for *her*, with God’s help, I will work out salvation through repentance, and thus save my future.”

He arose and left her crouching by his seat, her hair bright in the dull red of the fire, her face and clasped hands in dense shadow. He walked to the window, and, throwing it open, looked out into the darkness.

Outside was the lonely-sounding wind, theplash of rain, and the weird sense of measureless gloom; but the rough air was welcome to Douglas after the stifling oppression of her sweet, guilt-tainted breath. Presently a murky bank of clouds drifted

away from the moon's face and revealed its pale glory, obscured only by a few troubled streaks of silver-grey vapour.

As the pure beams broadened, the wind subsided and the rain ceased; and in a little while all Auriel was luminous with their weird light.

Douglas's face was turned in the direction of the Auriel churchyard, as though he could see, through the masses of grey woodland, the glimmer of one little gravestone, near which the winter flowers looked white, like all else in the moonlight.

When he next looked on the woman by the fire, his eyes were gentler, and his voice less stern.

"Ana," he said, "I do not presume to judge you. I can forgive all, even this last attempted fraud of your guileful nature; but a season may come when the Master of all Worlds, the Creator and the Preserver, the Destroyer and the Regenerator of all earthly atoms, will grow impatient of your

impenitence. Take heed, lest you injure even mercy too greatly to be forgiven. You have lied all your life; you have come to me to-day with your old sins, stronger, and without the saving excuse of youthful folly. In earnest of my forgiveness, I ask you to repent; but do not molest me again. In arousing in me human passion, you may invoke the human desire of vengeance. I desire to be left with my God and my memory. Now go!"

She arose humbly enough, and, without one more wasted word or gesture, went straight to the door.

She stopped there, and gave him one last look—such a one as a chidden hound may turn on the master hand. And then, finding her glance was not returned, she slowly passed through the doorway and disappeared in the darkness. As the soft rustle of her trailing robes was heard no more, Douglas's face recovered somewhat of the repose which had distinguished it

before her voice broke in on the solemnity of his desolation. When the trouble of doubt again perturbed his eyes, he turned them upwards, and sent the passionate appeal of his broken heart to that world which faith images as the pure soul's reward—

“ Oh, God, give me hope ! ”

* * * * *

What hope remains for such as these ? I do not set up for a philosopher, and I dislike stories written on purpose to point a moral ; but I affirm that life is more sad and more incomplete than writers are apt to admit. In the *finis* of the novelist we hear often of remorse which is assuaged by penitence, of ambition which seizes its crown, of passion jubilant with success, of bridal bells which clang joy for evermore to the fictitious heroes and heroines. But how is it in truth ? Does hope always grasp its fruition ? Is to repent to forget ? Is love an Arcadian pastoral ? Is it not

rather a splendid tragedy? Whether its end be an agony of frustration, or the despair of satiety, who can say that such end is peace?

The motto of life is imperfection. I have ventured to describe some phases of its failure, caused by defect of feeling in some of the personages I have introduced to the reader, by excess of feeling in others. But life's soreness and life's delight, life's endeavours and life's indifference, are best embodied in the four lines from which I have taken the title of this story:—

“Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungallèd play;
For some must watch, while some must sleep:
So runs the world away.”

THE END.

